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NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**STATE APPROACHES TOWARD REDUCING YOUTH
VIOLENCE IN HONDURAS AND NICARAGUA**

by

Luis E. Preciado

September 2015

Thesis Advisor:
Second Reader:

Arturo C. Sotomayor
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**STATE APPROACHES TOWARD REDUCING YOUTH VIOLENCE IN
HONDURAS AND NICARAGUA**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES
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from the

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ABSTRACT

Nicaragua and Honduras are neighbor countries situated in one of the most violent regions of the world. As such, they share many similarities, including geopolitics, a history of political violence and insurgency, as well as a repressive authoritarian past. In spite of the two countries' similarities, their divergent policing and public security policies have led to equally divergent outcomes in crime and homicide rates. What factors explain this divergence? How effective are their respective policing and security policies in confronting the proliferation of violence among the youth of their nations? Analysis of these questions helps U.S. policy-makers gain greater understanding of the critical factors that are contributing to Central America's escalating youth violence. By way of a most-similar systems approach, this thesis analyzes the aspects that either enable or degrade state efforts to address their youth gang crisis. In sum, building strong and accountable criminal justice institutions as well as addressing the socioeconomic challenges that confront youth populations are necessary preconditions for reducing youth violence. To assist our regional partners in restoring security to their nations, U.S. policymakers need to promote programs that help strengthen institutional capacities and expand social programs that assist at-risk youth.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CARSI	Central America Regional Security Initiative
EPS	Ejército Popular Sandinista (Sandinista Popular Army)
EREM	Educación para Resistir y Evitar las Maras (Education to Resist and Avoid the Maras)
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front)
GAO	Government Accountability Office
IIRIRA	Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act
INE	Instituto Nacional de Estadística (National Statistics Institute)
MIGOB	Ministerio de Gobernación (Ministry of Interior)
MS-13	Mara Salvatrucha
NGO	non-governmental organization
PNPRRS	Programa Nacional de Prevención y Reinserción Social (National Program of Prevention, Rehabilitation and Social Reintegration)
RESDAL	Security and Defense Network of Latin America (Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina)
TIGRES	Tropa de Investigación y Grupo de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad (Special Intelligence and Security Response Troops)
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

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I dedicate this thesis to my loving parents, Fernando and Emilia Preciado.

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I. INTRODUCTION

According to a 2013 U.N. study, Nicaragua ranks among the safest countries in the world, with only 11 homicides per 100,000 people.¹ The Nicaraguan government has managed to maintain low levels of homicides through the application of domestic security policies that do not involve the military.² Conversely, Honduras recorded the highest homicide rate in the world the same year, 90 homicides per 100,000 people (see Figure 1).³ To limit the violence, the Honduran government has militarized its domestic security efforts to gain greater control over gang-ridden regions. The extensive persecution and imprisonment of youth gang members, however, has failed to reduce the incidence of crime and violence.⁴ A focused comparison between these two countries may allow us to identify causal variables that produce the high rate of homicides and gang violence in Honduras but not in Nicaragua. Furthermore, by comparing and contrasting judicial systems, law enforcement structures, domestic security policies, and existing social programs in Honduras and Nicaragua, we can extract valuable lessons for the development of effective public security reforms.

Understanding the region's failing and successful policing strategies is significant to U.S. policymakers. Since 2008, the U.S. Congress has appropriated over \$1.2 billion to fund the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and interagency programs that support its objectives to help restore security to the region.⁵ An extensive analysis is necessary to ensure that U.S.-sponsored

¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data* (Vienna: UNODC, 2013), 126.

² José Miguel Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America: The Survival of the Violent State," *Latin American Politics and Society* 53, no. 4 (2011): 19–21.

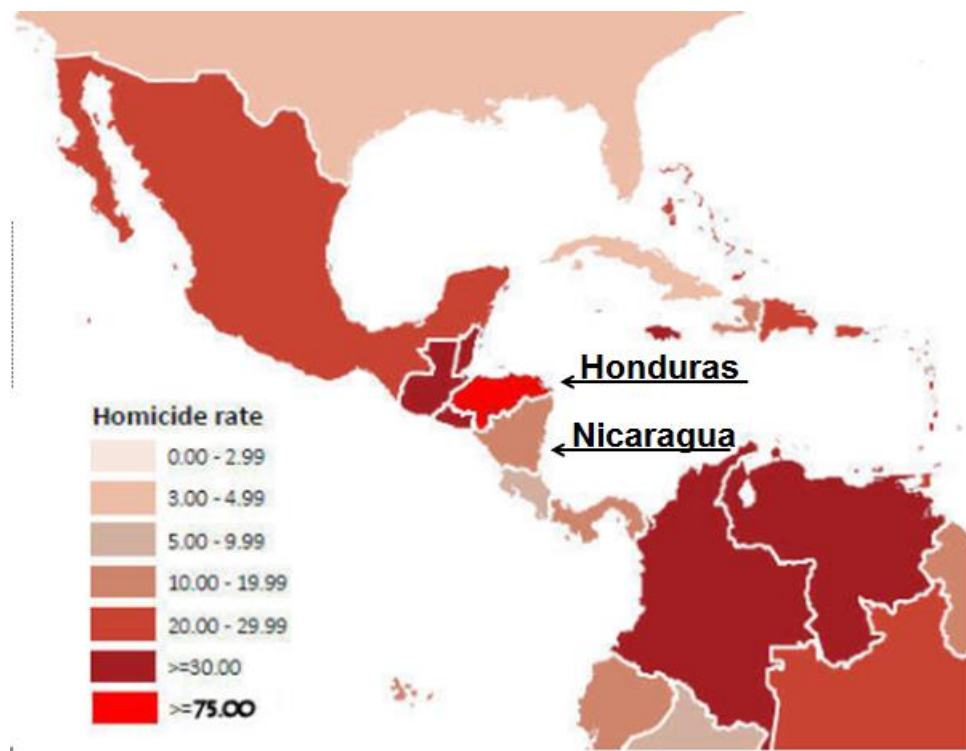
³ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, 126.

⁴ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire* (Vienna: UNODC, 2007), 9.

⁵ Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Central America: U.S. Agencies Considered Various Factors in Funding Security Activities, but Need to Assess Progress in Achieving Interagency Objectives* (GAO-13-771) (Washington, DC: GAO, September 2013), 9.

programs do not inadvertently fund failing policies that contribute to the escalating youth violence and human rights violations. As the United States continues to invest billions of dollars toward security-assistance programs in Central America, funded programs should reinforce only successful policies, those that reduce violence and improve the capabilities of vital institutions. By analyzing how Honduran security policies have failed to control the surge in violence and how Nicaragua has managed to achieve safer conditions, CARSI policy-makers could develop improved comprehensive security strategies and replicate successful policies throughout Central America. Furthermore, understanding the theoretical frameworks that explain how Honduras and Nicaragua developed their security policies can help predict whether the security institutions of the respective nations will embrace or reject policy recommendations.

Figure 1. Regional Homicide Map, 2012⁶



⁶ "War on Drugs—Central America," *Global Security.org*, last modified June 22, 2015, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/war-on-drugs-centam.htm>.

A. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many social theorists have sought to identify and explain the factors that are causing youth crime rates to climb in Central America. These scholars have written books and articles to provide policy suggestions and to support the affected nations with effective policing and prevention strategies. A great portion of the literature focuses on two major themes: criticism and descriptions of policing methods to confront youth violence; and explanations for why nations implement certain policies. This literature review analyzes the major themes that pertain to state responses to the tragic escalation of youth violence in Central America.

1. The Heavy-Handed Approach—*Mano Dura*

Most of the available literature on Central America focuses on the policing strategies common among the Northern Triangle states of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Some regional leaders have embraced zero-tolerance policing, such as *mano dura* (heavy-handed) policing, under the assumption that such policies would be effective at improving security in locations overrun by criminal activity.⁷ The underlying assumption of this policy is that, through the use of aggressive tactics, military and police can deter anti-social behaviors that often take root in dangerous neighborhoods. By criminalizing misdemeanors and *perceived* unlawful behaviors as well as implementing strong punishments for them, security forces hope to deter prospective criminals' lawless and violent intentions.⁸

Political Science Professor Mark Ungar argues that Latin American leaders often enact zero-tolerance policies without the necessary oversight mechanisms to ensure security agencies effectively reduce violent crimes as well

⁷ Peter J. Meyer and Clare Ribando Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative: Background and Policy Issues for Congress* (CRS Report for Congress No. R41731), Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014, 12–15.

⁸ Mark Ungar, "Policing Youth in Latin America," in *Youth Violence in Latin America*, eds. Dennis Rodgers and Gareth A. Jones (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 205.

as respect the civil rights of the communities they serve.⁹ Youth populations tend to be the most obvious victims of zero-tolerance policing, for they often suffer police brutality and unwarranted persecution. According to Ungar, “90 percent of the victims of police abuse were men between the ages of 15 and 24” from poor neighborhoods.¹⁰ Enrique Desmond Arias also claims that *mano dura* programs are counterproductive because they have increased the levels of violence in the streets of Central America. Disenfranchised youths have become more aggressive in response to increased incarcerations and hostility from security forces. Previously disorganized gangs are now more cohesive in coordinating attacks against security forces, rival gangs, and the public.¹¹ The contributions of both Ungar and Arias are useful in explaining the failures of *mano dura* policies. Furthermore, they give credibility to claims that ineffective policing and repression only instigate violent responses from oppressed youth.

2. Soft-Handed and Community-Oriented Approaches

In an effort to avoid replicating the failures of *mano dura* policies, Mark Ungar and José Luis Rocha advocate for more lenient policing strategies.¹² They recommend state agencies implement soft-handed approaches that promote prevention, rehabilitation, and community-building to reduce gang-related youth violence. Ungar attests that community-oriented policing is far more effective than *mano dura* strategies because it aims to address and resolve the social ills that are impacting Central American youth. Community-oriented policing seeks to establish stronger ties between community members, police officers, and social service organizations. State agencies reduce criminal behavior and gang membership among the youth by establishing better coordination between

⁹ Ibid., 205–6.

¹⁰ Ibid., 206.

¹¹ Enrique Desmond Arias, “State Power and Central American Maras: A Cross-National Comparison,” in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*, eds. Thomas Bruneau, Lucia Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 132.

¹² José Luis Rocha, “Street Gangs of Nicaragua,” in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*, eds. Thomas Bruneau, Lucia Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 118–9; Ungar, “Policing Youth in Latin America,” 214–216.

criminal justice agencies, local schools, and social services that support at-risk youth.¹³

Through community policing, officers have greater opportunities to become involved within their communities and build relationships with local youths. Furthermore, police officers gain invaluable insight into the immediate hardships and concerns inflicting the lives of disenfranchised local residents.¹⁴ According to José Luis Rocha, policing strategies that integrate support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are highly proactive in reducing gang violence. NGOs reinforce police-sponsored community-building projects because they help establish job programs for unskilled youths and encourage civic participation.¹⁵ In recent years, the Nicaraguan National Police's Juvenile Affairs Division has achieved substantial reductions in gang membership by conducting anti-gang activities that target at-risk youth within the impoverished municipalities of Nicaragua.¹⁶

3. Democratic Transitions: Their Impact on Internal Security

According to a recent report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), repressive and heavy-handed approaches remain commonplace in Central America.¹⁷ Following the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, many Central American security elites who were members of the former authoritarian governments still hold positions of power within the new democratic regimes.¹⁸ For this reason, scholars examine authoritarian transitions toward democracy in an effort to explain their impact on internal security. A preponderance of the literature claims that the manner in which states transition

¹³ Ungar, "Policing Youth in Latin America," 214–215.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 114.

¹⁶ Clare Ribando Seelke, *Gangs in Central America* (CRS Report for Congress No. RL34112), Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014, 10.

¹⁷ UNODC, *Crime and Development in Central America*, 14

¹⁸ Ibid.

from their former authoritarian regimes determines the type of democratic regime that eventually emerges.

Charles T. Call explores the influence of government transitions on security reforms in new democracies. According to Call, the *modes of transition* matter because they determine whether an emerging democratic state will be successful in establishing meaningful security reforms. He argues that war transitions or the collapse of authoritarian regimes offer the best opportunities for post-authoritarian governments to enact significant security reforms.¹⁹ Meaningful civilian-led security reforms can only transpire when the armed forces of the pre-existing regime have been significantly weakened or demilitarized. Complete collapses of existing authoritarian regimes also give way to new security, intelligence, and legal institutions, which are more responsive to and representative of the public's security needs. Because a weakened security force is a prerequisite, a state that does not undergo a war transition is bound to struggle in achieving meaningful reforms.²⁰ At the time of his article's publication, Call considered Honduras an exceptional case because it was able to advance significant security reforms without undergoing a war transition. Contrary to the regional norm, the country was able to undergo a nonviolent democratic transition and establish comprehensive security reforms by significantly weakening and subordinating its armed forces.²¹ Call's observations also validate Nicaragua's ability to improve security reforms in the aftermath of the Somoza government's collapse. However, his argument falls short of explaining why Honduras has resorted to highly repressive and militarized security policies after achieving significant improvements in the 1990s.

José Miguel Cruz has also contributed to the democratic transition literature. He argues that nations are better able to implement effective security

¹⁹ Charles T. Call, "War Transitions and the New Civilian Security in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 35, no.1 (2002): 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

²¹ Call, "War Transitions," 13.

reforms only when *violent entrepreneurs* from the prior regime are excluded from the political transition process. Cruz points to a critical juncture at which point a state has the opportunity to prevent former security elites from maintaining positions of power within the security apparatus of the post-transition government. When violent entrepreneurs continue to exercise power, states are destined to endure high levels of violence.²² In the case of Nicaragua, Cruz claims that it was able to achieve significant security reforms through the complete removal of the Somoza regime and demobilization of Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) security forces in the 1990s. As a result, the Nicaraguan state has been effective in maintaining a lower incidence of violence and capable of addressing its domestic gang problems. In contrast, Honduran violent entrepreneurs who formed part of the military dictatorship continue to hold prominent positions within police, military, and intelligence institutions. Because Honduras' transition was incomplete, violent entrepreneurs persist in promoting a culture of violence in which security institutions continue to employ repressive tactics against civilians.²³

4. Institutional Arguments

In his article "Violence, Democracy and Human Rights in Latin America," Todd Landman claims that many Latin American nations lack state institutions with the capacity to safeguard the rights of their citizens.²⁴ When states have weak institutions, they are unable to provide citizens basic legal protections or shield them from unjust persecution from rogue state-actors. Landman asserts that the state itself becomes the biggest perpetrator of violence when its government fails to establish the necessary legal conditions and oversight mechanisms to employ state violence lawfully. When security institutions are

²² Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 1–3.

²³ Ibid., 19–21.

²⁴ Todd Landman, "Violence, Democracy, and Human Rights in Latin America," in *Violent Democracies in Latin America*, eds. Enrique Desmond Arias and Daniel M. Goldstein (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 227.

weak and lack systems of accountability, security actors are prone to exploit their positions of authority and ignore the legal protections and rights of citizens. To resolve such abuses of power, states need to build strong legal institutions and employ systems of horizontal and vertical accountability to ensure state agencies neither abuse their privileges nor violate the rights of citizens.²⁵

A state is less likely to behave in a repressive manner or carry out extra-legal forms of violence when it builds strong legal institutions and systems of oversight to reinforce its security strategies.²⁶ Todd Landman's institutional arguments are highly effective in identifying the major flaws that exist within failing Latin American security policies. Furthermore, his arguments provide an explanatory framework for defining why Honduras and Nicaragua continue to experience divergent results in providing security and maintaining low levels of youth violence. An analysis of these two countries may demonstrate that their abilities to implement effective security policies are closely linked to their institutional capacities to apply the rule of law and respect the legal rights of individuals.

5. Structural Arguments

The Central American states that have felt the greatest impact from the U.S. Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act are more inclined to employ aggressive anti-gang strategies. Since the implementation of this 1996 U.S. policy to deport criminals back to their nations of origin, many Central American nations have become saturated with youth gang members, called *mareros* or *maras*. According to Dennis Rodgers, Robert Muggah, and Chris Stevenson, this policy created devastating security challenges when it led to the U.S. deportation of more than 200,000 criminal and illegal immigrants back to Central America from 1998 to 2005.²⁷ However, the long-term social and

²⁵ Ibid., 237–9

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dennis Rodgers et al., *Gangs of Central America: Causes, Costs, and Interventions* (Geneva, Switzerland: Small Arms Survey, 2009), 7.

security impacts of the criminal deportees vary by country. The Northern Triangle has endured significant increases in gang violence because it received over 90 percent of the deportees. A large portion of the criminal deportees were members of two of the most ruthless street gangs in Los Angeles, the 18th Street Gang and the Mara-Salvatrucha. Upon return, former U.S. gang members quickly replicated the same criminal behavior and violent tendencies of the East Los Angeles streets in the neighborhoods of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. In contrast, Nicaragua did not experience the surge in gang violence since only three percent of deportees were of Nicaraguan descent. Furthermore, the Nicaraguan diaspora in the United States has tended to settle in Miami, where its immigrants have not assimilated into the ethno-centric gangs dominated by African- and Cuban-Americans.²⁸ Advocates of the deportation literature explain how U.S. immigration policies have created a security crisis in the Northern Triangle region. However, they fall short of explaining why the inflicted states have failed to integrate deportees into society before they assimilate into criminal organizations.

Structuralists also attribute the rise in Central American violence to the youth gangs' increasing involvement in drug-trafficking.²⁹ According to a 2012 UNODC report on transnational organized crime, Central America began to experience an increased incidence of violence once greater quantities of cocaine shipments began traversing the region in 2006. Traffickers began to utilize Central American drug routes with greater regularity when the Mexican government became more adept at intercepting drug shipments arriving directly from South America. As a result of Mexico's 2006 anti-narcotic strategy, drug traffickers found it less risky to transport cocaine into Mexico through the overland routes of Central America. With greater quantities of cocaine moving through the region, Central American gangs began to fight each other for control

²⁸ Ibid., 7–9.

²⁹ José Miguel Cruz et al., "Political Transition, Social Violence, and Gangs: Cases in Central America and Mexico," in *In the Wake of War: Democratization and Internal Armed Conflict in Latin America*, ed. Cynthia J. Arnson (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 317.

of critical drug routes. In Honduras, the regions that have experienced the greatest incidence of violence are located directly along mobility corridors used to transport cocaine. Along with the upsurge of drugs moving through Central America comes an increase in turf wars between rival gangs.³⁰ In response, Central American governments have begun implementing stricter measures to address the unprecedented levels of violence they are experiencing.³¹ A gap that exists within the drug trafficking literature is the exclusion of Nicaragua. Similar to the Northern Triangle states, Nicaragua is a major transient state for U.S.-bound drugs. However, in contrast, it has not experienced the same upsurge in violent clashes of youth gangs.

Structural arguments also claim that states implement security policies to address the societal perceptions of youth gangs. When communities, the media, and political elites all see youths as menaces to public security, they encourage security institutions to enact harsh and repressive policies. However, when the public discourse does not classify youths as threats, the public is less likely to support harsh anti-gang policies. In his article “Youth Violence in Central America: Discourse and Policies,” Peter Peetz argues, “There is a strong relationship and mutual influence between the public’s fear (or disregard) of youth violence and the state’s policies to reduce that kind of violence.”³² Hence, public perceptions are a significant driving factor in determining state preferences over security and prevention strategies. In many Central American neighborhoods, the public considers youth gangs the primary threat to domestic security. Since youth gangs are the most visible groups to display anti-social behavior, they intensify public anxieties and concerns over domestic security.³³ Peetz’s observations demonstrate how public opinion can shape the security

³⁰ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean: A Threat Assessment* (Vienna: UNODC, 2012), 11.

³¹ Cruz et al., “Political Transition, Social Violence, and Gangs,” 317.

³² Peter Peetz, “Youth Violence in Central America: Discourses and Policies,” *Youth & Society* 43, no. 4 (2011): 1487.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1487–88.

policies that states implement. However, his argument falls short of explaining how states can appease the public's perception of violent youths. According to his argument, harsh and repressive policies will remain commonplace unless the public begins to sympathize with disenfranchised this demographic.

B. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Among the various explanations that scholars have provided to explain the dynamics of Central American security policies and the factors that propagate violence, none were more convincing than the institutional arguments provided by Todd Landman.³⁴ He makes the case that security policies can only be successful when they are reinforced by strong and accountable institutions. Furthermore, Ungar and Rocha provide a useful framework for addressing the social ills that are inflicting at-risk youth through the incorporation of prevention and rehabilitation programs.³⁵ Strong institutions and prevention programs appear to be the essential elements for building stronger and safer communities. For these reasons, this thesis hypothesizes that Honduras continues to exercise repressive, ineffective security policies because it possesses weak institutions and has failed to promote social programs that assist its vulnerable youth population. Conversely, Nicaragua has been able to maintain lower homicide rates and a lower incidence of youth violence because it has moderately better institutions and a robust program to provide social services to potential gang members and juvenile delinquents. In order for security strategies to succeed in reducing youth violence, Central American states need to strengthen their criminal justice institutions as well as promote programs that help improve the socioeconomic challenges of at-risk youth.

³⁴ Landman, "Violence, Democracy, and Human Rights in Latin America," 229–240.

³⁵ Ungar, "Policing Youth in Latin America," 206; Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 114.

C. RESEARCH DESIGN

Given their proximate location, economic underdevelopment, and social similarities, this thesis will provide a comparative analysis of Honduras and Nicaragua using a most-similar systems approach. These two countries are ideal cases to study because, despite their similarities, these states have significant variations in their security policies and homicide rates. The aim of this thesis is to compare and contrast Honduran and Nicaraguan efforts to address their security dilemmas and constrain the escalation of youth gang violence. By comparing and contrasting the policies that these states have implemented, this thesis will attempt to identify the variables that are contributing to Honduras failure and Nicaragua's success to reduce the high incidence of homicides and gang violence. At the end of this process, this thesis aims to isolate the factors that are contributing to Honduras' security difficulties in an effort to provide policy recommendations. This thesis relies on the data of various sources to include public policy documents, scholarly books, journals, and articles. For statistical data, this thesis makes use of informational reports published by organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the Washington Office on Latin America, the World Health Organization, the Wilson Center, and other reputable institutions.

D. THESIS OVERVIEW

In the forthcoming chapters, this thesis will identify correlations between the outcomes of existing state security policies and the strength of their respective law enforcement, judicial, and penal institutions. This thesis will also identify linkages between the application of preventative and rehabilitative social programs for youths and their ability to reduce violence and improve security conditions. Chapters II and III will focus on Honduras and Nicaragua, respectively. The chapters will present how each country is addressing its juvenile delinquency issues, through the implantation of domestic policies, security reforms, and social programs. This thesis will make use of statistical

data to highlight the variation between the nations, to include: crime and violence trends, human rights records, prison demographics, gang populations, and immigration/deportation trends. Chapter IV will summarize the findings and offer recommendations for future U.S. policy considerations and CARSI initiatives.

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II. HONDURAS

As a result of escalating youth gang violence, the Central American nation of Honduras is currently undergoing a devastating national security crisis. According to a U.N. study, Honduras was the most dangerous country in the world in 2013, with a documented 90 homicides per 100,000 people.³⁶ Figures from the World Bank reveal that young men in Central America, between the ages of 15 and 25, are the predominant offenders and victims of violence.³⁷ World Bank assessments also indicate that extreme poverty, lack of education, and the influx of cocaine trafficking into the Central American region are among the primary drivers impelling Honduran youth to adopt delinquent behavior and join major transnational criminal gangs.³⁸ In an effort to restore public security and reduce the incidence of youth violence, the Honduran government has embraced zero-tolerance policies such as *mano dura*, or heavy-handed policing. Governments undergoing significant security issues often prefer *mano dura* policies, for they believe that mass incarcerations can be effective in restoring order when properly implemented.³⁹ However, the Honduran government's efforts to apply *mano dura* policies against their criminal youth have been counterproductive because the levels of violence have continued to rise steeply since 2002. The Honduran government has been unsuccessful in addressing youth violence because it has weak criminal justice institutions to enforce *mano dura* policies and has failed to address the socioeconomic challenges confronting Honduran youth.⁴⁰

³⁶ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, 126.

³⁷ The World Bank, *Crime and Violence in Central America: A Development Challenge*, Washington, DC: The World Bank, Sustainable Development Department and Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Unit, Latin America and the Caribbean Region, 2011, 15–17.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 3–18.

³⁹ Ungar, "Policing Youth in Latin America," 205.

⁴⁰ Arias, "State Power and Central American Maras," 132.

This chapter examines why the Honduran government continues to exercise repressive, ineffective *mano dura* policies even when it possesses weak criminal justice institutions and has failed to promote social programs that may assist its vulnerable youth population. The first section provides an overview of youth violence in Honduras. The next section explains how the Honduran government has relied on repressive zero-tolerance policies to confront rising youth violence and gang criminality. Section three highlights the institutional weaknesses that exist within the Honduran national security apparatus to effectively employ *mano dura* policies. Section four elaborates on the Honduran government's efforts to collaborate with NGOs to implement preventative and rehabilitative strategies for youth violence and gangs. The chapter concludes with findings and recommendations for improving the Honduran government's approach for reducing youth violence.

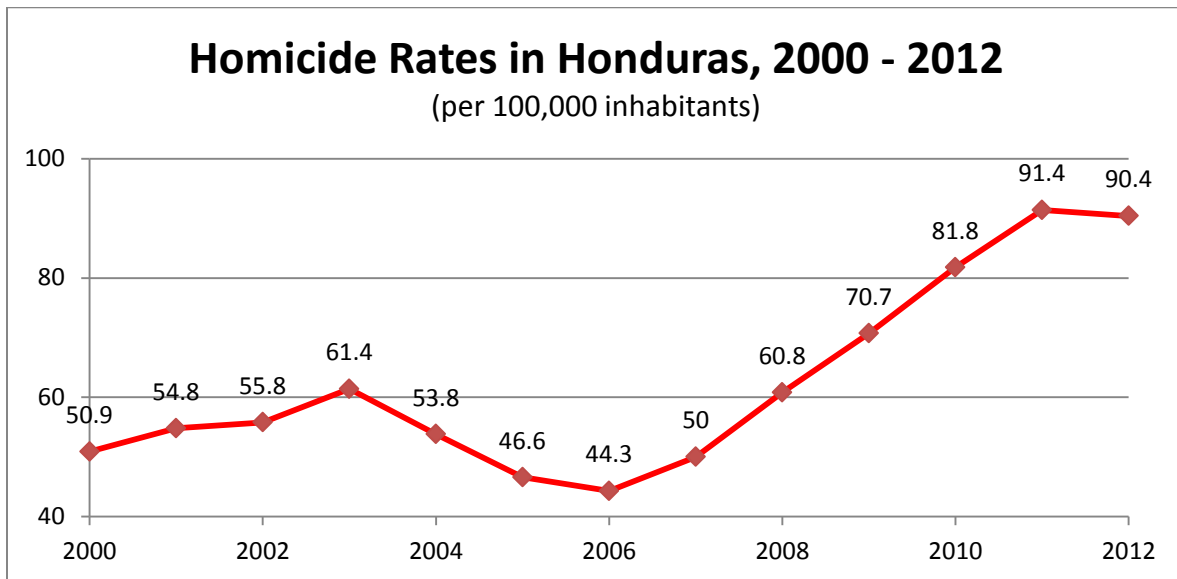
A. THE EXTENT OF YOUTH VIOLENCE IN HONDURAS

In the last 15 years, Honduran youth have experienced a drastic increase in violence (see Figure 2). Incidences of violence and homicides involving Honduran youth rank among the highest in the world. In Honduras, young men ranging from ages 12 to 24 are more likely to die by violence than by any other cause.⁴¹ Although young males make up only 14 percent of the Honduran population, the national police reported in 2001 that youth homicides represented more than 70 percent of the violent deaths recorded for that year.⁴² As homicide rates continue to climb in the Central American nation, young males continue to play a major role in carrying out violent acts and representing the demographic that endures the highest levels of homicide victimization.

⁴¹ Jon Wolseth, "Safety and Sanctuary: Pentecostalism and Youth Gang Violence in Honduras" *Latin American Perspectives* 35, Issue 161, no. 4 (2008): 98.

⁴² Ibid.

Figure 2. Homicide Rates in Honduras⁴³



Social, economic, and educational impediments are among the primary factors exposing Honduran youth to lives filled with crime and violence. According to a 2011 national survey of Honduran households conducted by the *Instituto Nacional de Estadística* (INE), 8.2 million Honduran citizens, 44.5 percent of the population is comprised of adolescents below 18 years of age.⁴⁴ The INE survey also indicated that 62 percent of Honduran households live in poverty, of which 42 percent find themselves in extreme poverty conditions. Confronting severe economic conditions, Honduran youth are increasingly lacking the opportunities to improve their socioeconomic conditions and escape their impoverished situations. Currently, the Honduran economy is not producing sufficient well-paying jobs to employ young adults seeking to enter the job market. Youth academic underperformance is also decreasing their ability to compete for good jobs. According to the INE survey, only 58 percent of minors between the ages of 5 and 18 were attending any form of educational institution. As children get older, their opportunities to receive a high school diploma

⁴³ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, 126.

⁴⁴ Instituto Nacional de Estadística (INE), *Cuadragésima Primera Encuesta Permanente de Hogares: Resumen Ejecutivo*, Vol. 41 (Tegucigalpa: INE, 2011): 4.

significantly decrease, since only 28 percent of Honduran youth between the ages of 16 and 18 were still enrolled in school.⁴⁵ Confronting severe economic conditions, families are increasingly relying on their children to work and contribute to the family income. As a result, many young students are dropping out of school to work informal, poor paying jobs. Honduran youth have the potential to improve their economic struggles and become productive citizens only when they gain the capacity to earn a high school diploma and acquire the skills to earn a well-paying job. Otherwise, extreme poverty and the lack of formal education will continue to induce youth to engage in criminal endeavors.

Marginalized Honduran youth, who are uneducated, lack essential job skills, and do not have supportive family networks, are extremely vulnerable to joining the highly criminal and violent Honduran maras, such as the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and the *Barrio 18* (18th Street Gang). In the last 15 years, the maras have been able to exploit the ongoing social conditions that currently exist in Honduras. Increasingly, youth are finding themselves becoming isolated from their homes and in desperate need of financial support. For many youth, joining a violent transnational gang is the only viable solution to escape their economic struggles and sense of abandonment by their families and government. As a result, Honduras has been experiencing substantial growth in gang memberships since the 1990s.⁴⁶ In 2007, the U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime estimated that Honduras was the nation with the most gang members in Central America. Although difficult to measure, the UNODC estimated that Honduras had over 36,000 gang members. Based on this figure, one in every 20 young males between the ages of 15 to 24 was a member of a Honduran mara or street gang (See Table 1).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ INE, *Cuadragésima Primera Encuesta Permanente de Hogares*, 6,14.

⁴⁶ Sonja Wolf, "Mara Salvatrucha: The Most Dangerous Street Gang in the Americas?" *Latin American Politics and Society* 54, no. 1 (2012): 70.

⁴⁷ UNODC, *Crime and Development in Central America*, 60.

Table 1. Central American Gang Membership⁴⁸

Country	Estimated Gang Members
Honduras	36,000
Guatemala	14,000
El Salvador	10,500
Nicaragua	4,500

Due to the overwhelming lack of legitimate employment opportunities, youth gang members in Honduras raise revenues through illicit means. Making matter worst, the methods that gangs employ to make money are becoming increasingly violent as the Honduran economy continues to stagnate. Some of the criminal methods that gangs employ to make money include: robberies, illegal sales of weapons, drug-trafficking, extortions, and murder for hire. Within the major Honduran cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, extortion rackets are the primary method that gangs employ to extract money from the public. For instance, youth gang members extort the majority of legal and illegal businesses that operate within their gang's defined territories. Small store owners, bus and taxi drivers, prostitutes, and drug dealers all have to pay steep extortion taxes to local gang members to continue operating their businesses. When business owners or workers refuse to pay the extortion rates, gang members respond violently by destroying their businesses or by assassinating business owners and members of their families. Increasingly within the last ten years, hundreds of business owners and workers, primarily within the informal transportation sectors, have been murdered by gang members due to their inability to meet the overwhelming monetary demands of gangs.⁴⁹

Within the last 15 years, Honduran youth gangs have also expanded the types of victims that they are now inclined to murder. Gang members no longer hesitate to kill or critically injure rival gang members, police informants, kids who

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Wolf, "Mara Salvatrucha," 78

decline to join their gangs, and young women who resist their sexual advances.⁵⁰ Scholars also attribute the high levels of violence to emergent gang initiation rituals and territorial disputes. As a demonstration of gang loyalty, aspiring members are performing rites of passage that entail killing innocent bystanders or members of rival gangs. Additionally, many violent acts and homicides are a result of turf disputes between rival gang as they battle to retain control of drug trafficking routes and neighborhoods.⁵¹

U.S. deportation policies are also contributing to the escalation of youth violence in Honduras. In accordance to the U.S. Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA), U.S. custom officials are deporting thousands of criminals and youth gang members to Honduras annually. Since many of the deportees have extensive criminal records or have tattoos portraying that they belong to notorious U.S. gangs, the Honduran government has been unable to integrate thousands of deportees into their society. Also complicating the reintegration of deportees are issues, such as: many of the deportees do not have families to return to and many do not speak Spanish, since they fled to the U.S. with their entire families as small children. As a result, many deportees that possess violent, criminal inclinations end up assimilating into the Honduran gangs, such as the MS-13 and Barrio 18. In contrast to the Honduran state, the violent transnational MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs have been more effective in reintegrating deportees, thus further expanding their numbers and capacity to inflict violence.⁵² As of 2003, Honduras has had to reconstitute over 330,000 deportees from the United States (See Table 2).⁵³

⁵⁰ Ibid., 78

⁵¹ Thomas C. Bruneau, "Pandillas and Security in Central America," *Latin American Research Review* 49, no. 2 (2014): 160.

⁵² Joanna Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*, eds. Thomas Bruneau, Lucia Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 94–95.

⁵³ U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), "Aliens Apprehended by Region and Country of Nationality," *2012 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics* (Washington, DC: DHS, 2013), p. 93.

Table 2. Annual Flow of U.S Deportations to Central America, DHS⁵⁴

Country	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Guatemala	10,355	14,288	25,909	25,144	23,907	33,690	33,882	36,228	39,153	55,307
Honduras	16,632	26,555	55,756	33,394	28,265	33,771	31,818	29,939	29,120	48,984
El Salvador	11,757	19,180	42,885	46,314	19,699	27,151	26,776	27,539	25,592	37,197
Nicaragua	1,055	1,664	4,272	3,228	2,119	2,801	2,674	2,417	2,150	2,413

⁵⁴ DHS, "2012 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics," 92–93.

As a result of gang violence, Honduran crime and homicide rates are surging drastically and are hindering the social and economic recovery of the nation. The high numbers of gang members committing crimes in the streets of Honduras have far exceeded the capacity of the national police and judicial system to maintain control and keep citizens safe. Rather than dedicating needed resources toward national economic recovery projects and investing toward the struggling, impoverished education system, the state has committed extensive economic resources to confront rising internal security threats. Foreign investors are also discouraged from expanding and taking advantage of business opportunities within Honduras as the state appears incapable of curbing the violence and reestablishing order. As long as the streets of Honduras remain dangerous, economic and social progress remains elusive.⁵⁵

B. STATE RESPONSES TO YOUTH VIOLENCE

Since 2002, the Honduran government has implemented many measures to reestablish order and security. Unfortunately, government institutions, to include the Honduran National Police, the judiciary, and the penal system, have all struggled to contain and prevent widespread criminal behavior associated with disenfranchised youth. Early on, politicians and policy-makers implemented aggressive, short-sighted policies that ultimately served to make security conditions worst.⁵⁶ As it stands, many policies have failed to reduce the increasing rates of violent crimes and homicides; ironically, many security efforts have had the unintended consequence of making youth gangs stronger, more organized, and more effective at carrying out their criminal activities.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," 88.

⁵⁶ Mark Ungar, "La Mano Dura: Current Dilemmas in Latin America Police Reform," in *Criminality, Public Security, and the Challenge to Democracy in Latin America*, eds. Marcelo Bergman and Laurence Whitehead (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 93–95.

⁵⁷ Wolf, "Mara Salvatrucha," 71–72.

1. **Mano Dura and Honduran Anti-gang Policies**

Soon after winning the Honduran presidential election on a staunch security platform, Honduran President Ricardo Maduro initiated the first of many anti-gang policies in 2002. Since security conditions were quickly deteriorating within the nation and throughout the northern triangle of Central America, the Honduran electorate overwhelmingly supported Maduro's policies that aimed to bring about a decisive end to social violence and growing insecurity. In rapid succession, Maduro and his administration were successful in reforming security policies in Article 332 of the Honduran Penal Code to directly target youth gangs. Successively, Maduro put into effect the security policies of *Cero Tolerancia* (Zero Tolerance), *Mano Dura*, and the *Ley Antimaras* (Anti-Gang Law).⁵⁸ The accumulated effect of these policies bestowed overwhelming authority to the police and military to conduct aggressive raids and security patrols within communities suspected of having high gang populations. In efforts to disband youth gangs and dissuade juveniles from joining them, Maduro's anti-gang laws made it lawful for police authorities to incarcerate individuals who are active members of a gang and youth who have close associations with them. Even in situations where individuals did not commit any crimes, anti-gang legislation made it possible for police to charge them with offences that carried heavy jail sentences.⁵⁹

Regrettably, the aggressive approaches adopted by Honduran politicians and national security services failed to prevent youth from associating with gangs or taking part in criminal activities. With the prevalence of mano dura policies, the levels of violence have continued to escalate dramatically throughout the country. Although the ruthless anti-gang policies achieved limited success in reducing national homicide rates during their first few years in practice, homicide rates

⁵⁸ Lirio Gutierrez Rivera, "Security Policies from a Spatial Perspective: The Case of Honduras," *Iberoamericana* XI, no. 41 (2011): 149.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 149–150.

began to surge in 2005.⁶⁰ Recorded homicides are now 200 percent greater from what they were at their lowest point in 2005.⁶¹

2. The Downsides of the Mano Dura Strategy

Among the primary issues that Honduran politicians and security institutions failed to anticipate was the massive overpopulation of incarcerated gang members that were a direct result of their strong-arm approach. Beginning in 2002, the government corralled thousands of youth gang members into severely understaffed and congested prisons. As a result, Honduran prisons and detention centers soon began to serve as command centers for the powerful *Maras* such as the MS-13 and the Barrio 18. Youth that were previously unaffiliated with any gangs had no choice but to join the *Maras* to ensure their survival within the prison system. Small disorganized gangs, also known as *clicas*, began to merge with the dominant *Maras*. Through the Honduran prison system, gangs were able to evolve into more violent organizations, expand their ranks, and better control their criminal enterprises from within the prison walls. The ineffectiveness of the Honduran Prison system also contributed to escalating the levels of violence. Massive prison riots became a common occurrence due to extreme overcrowded conditions. The poor administration and security of the Honduran prison system led to the deaths of many young detainees. By the time most Honduran youth complete their jail sentences they adapt violent behaviors and establish affiliations with *maras*, which they did not have prior to their incarcerations.⁶²

Most prominent scholars on Central American security matters agree that the Honduran strong-arm approach was an inappropriate response toward improving the security conditions of the nation. Furthermore, such policies failed to protect the civil rights of Honduran youth and children from undue police

⁶⁰ Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," 98–99.

⁶¹ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, 126.

⁶² Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," 98.

persecution. Mano dura policies that targeted youth gangs were flawed for many reasons. First, politicians and security institutions primarily targeted youth gangs, even when police and government institutions recognized that they were contributing only a third of national criminal offenses and homicides.⁶³ A strong stance against youth gangs also provided political gains to government officials, so their constituents would perceive them as being tough on crime. Rather than targeting hardened criminal organizations or attempting to solve the social ills that were compelling youth to a life of crime, youth gangs became the scape goats for many politicians and security institutions.⁶⁴

Second, unqualified and unprofessional police and military personnel, performing the duties prescribed under the mano dura policies, consistently overstepped their authority and carried out extensive abuses of power against youths. Through their expanded police powers, security personnel terrorized the youths of poor neighborhoods by conducting mass raids to incarcerate perceived gang members and force confessions out of them. For many years, police officers also incarcerated thousands of youths with very little criminal evidence. As a result of these abusive practices, thousands of youth and children have fallen victims to extrajudicial killings carried out by improperly trained security officers.⁶⁵ According to Mark Ungar, Honduran state officials estimated that there were over 2,300 extrajudicial killings of youth and children from 1998 to 2005, many of which were attributed to the police.⁶⁶ However, security officials suspected of being abusive or committing extrajudicial killings rarely face punishment because Honduran judicial and security institutions are notoriously corrupt.⁶⁷

⁶³ Ungar, "La Mano Dura," 97.

⁶⁴ Oliver Jütersonke et al., "Gangs, Urban Violence, and Security Interventions in Central America," *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 4–5 (2009): 392.

⁶⁵ Ungar, "La Mano Dura," 98

⁶⁶ *Ibíd.*, 98

⁶⁷ Ungar, "La Mano Dura," 100.

C. INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY AND MECHANISMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

Honduran government efforts to effectively employ *mano dura* policies and reduce youth gang violence are a result of the inability of institutions, such as the criminal justice system, the penitentiary sector, and the national police, to perform their duties adequately. For the most part, these state institutions are consistently understaffed and underfunded to effectively train and prepare personnel to perform their necessary functions and address the security crisis.⁶⁸ For *mano dura* policies to succeed, it is necessary for a state to invest heavily in developing and training its personnel to aptly restore order without violating the human rights of its citizens. Strong-arm and zero-tolerance policies require extensive training of personnel, institutional mechanisms of accountability, and improved capacities for courts and prisons to process prisoners. Without these measures in place, a state could exacerbate the situation by permitting unfit institutions to violate the rights of individuals through repressive tactics and ineffective judicial procedures.⁶⁹ According to Todd Landman, “The obligation to respect human rights requires the state and all its organs and agents to abstain from carrying out, sponsoring, tolerating any practice, policy, or legal measure that violates the integrity of individuals or impinges on their freedom to access resources to satisfy their needs.”⁷⁰ Unfortunately for the citizens of Honduras, the national security, penal, and judicial institutions have failed to make the safeguarding of their civil and human rights their primary responsibility.

1. The Honduran Public Ministry

The Honduran Public Ministry, which role is similar to the U.S. Office of the Attorney General, has struggled to ensure that the nation’s security policies preserve the constitutional rights of the Honduran citizens. For many years, the

⁶⁸ Lainie Reisman, “Breaking the Vicious Cycle: Responding to Central American Youth Gang Violence,” *SAIS Review* 26, no. 2 (2006): 149.

⁶⁹ Ungar, “La Mano Dura,” 95.

⁷⁰ Landman, “Violence, Democracy, and Human Rights in Latin America,” 237.

public ministry has been extremely weak in carrying out its duties as the national ombudsman. Consistently, the public ministry has lacked the fiscal resources necessary to hire and develop a trustworthy staff of professional prosecutors to fill critical positions throughout the nation. Honduras has among the lowest levels of prosecutor-to-inhabitant ratios in Latin America, which currently stands at 6.4 prosecutors for every 100,000 citizens.⁷¹ With so few prosecutors within its ranks, the public ministry lacks the necessary manpower to investigate and prosecute criminal cases. Most notably, it is unable to act as a watchdog to ensure state actors neither behave illegally nor violate the civil and legal rights of imprisoned youths. As recent as June 2013, the head of the Honduran Public Ministry, Attorney General Luis Alberto Rubi, resigned under pressure from civil society groups and members of congress, who accused the ministry of incompetence and corruption.⁷²

The public ministry's continued support of ineffective zero-tolerance policies highlights its greatest weakness. Rather than being an advocate for the rule of law and the ethical prosecution of criminal actors, the public ministry has supported policies that are discriminatory and overly repressive, especially toward Honduran youth. With the support of the public ministry, government officials were able to sanction laws that permitted security personal to actively target youth gangs and enter private homes without requiring search warrants (Presidential Decree 123–2002), expand the role of the military in support of police anti-gang functions (*Honduras Segura*), and authorize the sentencing of youths with prison sentenced of 6–12 years for being members of a gang (*Ley Anti-Maras*). Through the provisions of these laws, the national police gained full authorization to incarcerate young men and women without judicial orders. As a result, police officers gained the authority to detain thousands of young adults without needing to provide any proof of them committing a single criminal act.

⁷¹ Aaron Korthuis, "CARSI in Honduras: Isolated Successes and Limited Impact," in *Crime and Violence in Central America's Northern Triangle: How U.S. Policy Responses are Helping, Hurting, and Can be Improved*, ed. Eric L. Olson (Washington, DC: Wilson Center, 2015), 184.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 183–184.

The mere perception that a youth may potentially commit a crime or have an association with a gang was sufficient grounds for police officers to make an arrest. The public ministry's inability to act as a mechanism of horizontal accountability permitted state officials to implement policies that completely disregarded the civil rights of individuals.⁷³

2. The Honduran Justice System

As a result of the massive enforcement efforts against youth gangs, the Honduran Justice System has been overwhelmed with hundreds of youths held in pre-trial detention centers waiting to have their cases heard before a judge. In most instances, detainees wait several months for their court dates to arrive due to the enormous backlog of cases. According to 2004 figures, 90 percent of the Honduran prison population has remained incarcerated without being sentenced.⁷⁴ Prior to having passed public security policies that were reliant on high incarceration rates, the Honduran government should have taken preliminary measures to ensure that it possessed sufficient trial judges to prevent bottlenecks within the judicial process.

The Honduran justice system also suffers from an extreme lack of credibility. The Honduran public is wary of their justice system for they perceive that judges are ineffective at processing cases, make judicial rulings that are politically biased, and are prone to be highly corrupt. Since all Honduran judges gain their positions through political appointments, their rulings tend to align with the party leaders who appoint them.⁷⁵ In an effort to promote judicial independence of the courts, the Honduran government needs to reform the

⁷³ Ungar, "Policing Youth in Latin America," 211.

⁷⁴ Mark Ungar and Ana Laura Magaloni, "Latin America's Prisons: A Crisis of Criminal Policy and Democratic Rule," in *Criminality, Public Security, and the Challenge to Democracy in Latin America*, eds. Marcelo Bergman and Laurence Whitehead (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 224.

⁷⁵ Marcelo Bergman and Laurence Whitehead, "Criminality and Citizen Security in Latin America," in *Criminality, Public Security, and the Challenge to Democracy in Latin America*, eds. Marcelo Bergman and Laurence Whitehead (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 10.

justice system so that judges assume office by way of an electoral process rather than through political appointments.⁷⁶ A stark example of the lack of judicial independence within the Honduran Judicial System occurred in late 2012. In this case, the Honduran National Congress fired four Supreme Court Judges for not ruling in their favor in a decision involving the national police.⁷⁷ It is essential that judges regain the confidence of the public. Youth have no incentives to be less violent or reduce their levels of criminality when they know judges will sentence them to long prison sentences regardless of the severity of their crimes.

3. Honduran Prisons

The Honduran penitentiary system is in a dire state of disrepair. As a result of *mano dura* policies, Honduran prisons have become overpopulated with youth prisoners yet dangerously understaffed to effectively secure the growing number of detainees. Undermanned prisons have become death traps and gang controlled zones rather than serving as facilities to promote the rehabilitation of juvenile offenders. Once in prison, youths become vulnerable to being killed by fellow prisoners, contracting diseases, suffering hunger, and likely of having their civil and lawful rights violated by state officials.⁷⁸ In 2004, the Honduran prison system employed fewer than 1,300 prison guards to supervise all 24 national detention centers. With an extremely large prison population, each prison guard was responsible for supervising more than 130 inmates.⁷⁹ Within the last ten years, prison overpopulation has ballooned even further. As recently as January 2013, the Honduran federal prisons held over 12,000 prisoners. Since Honduras

⁷⁶ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁷ Korthuis, "CARSI in Honduras," 186.

⁷⁸ Ungar and Magaloni, "Latin America's Prisons," 223.

⁷⁹ Lirio Gutiérrez Rivera, "Discipline and Punish? Youth Gangs' Response to 'Zero-Tolerance' Policies in Honduras," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 29, no. 4 (2010): 498.

only has the space to house 8,120 prisoners, this prison population exceeded the national prison capacity by over 50 percent.⁸⁰

Since prison authorities lack the capacity to establish order and provide basic services to inmates, MS-13 and Barrio 18 gang leaders fill the state's void. These gangs have become so powerful and dominant of the Honduran prison system that they determine which areas prison guards have access to and which prisons inmates get assigned to. Due to the state's lack of control, members of the violent transnational gangs are the ones that end up filling the roles as administrators of the Honduran prisons. Within the prison walls, gang leaders are the only ones capable of imposing their authority and determining which inmates have access to essential services. For this reason, new inmates have no other choice but to become affiliated with the major prison gangs to gain access to food, protection, and suitable shelter. In essence, the prisons have become an extension of the territory gangs control within Honduras.⁸¹

To regain control of the gang-dominated prisons, the Honduran government passed the Penitentiary System Law in 2012. With the new law, state officials are reforming the national penitentiary system and working toward improving prison conditions. As part of the penitentiary law, the government transferred control of the prison system from the national police to the newly created National Penitentiary Institute. The new law no longer permits the mixture of unsentenced detainees, which had predominantly consisted of youths, to live alongside hardened criminals. The law establishes that prisoners be secured in facilities that correspond to their length of sentences. For instance, the state will now hold persons in pre-trial confinement in establishment centers, prisoners facing short sentences in local prisons, prisoners sentenced to less than three years in departmental prisons, and felons with sentences greater than three years in the national penitentiary centers. The Penitentiary System Law will

⁸⁰ Security and Defense Network of Latin America (RESDAL), *Public Security Index Central America: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama*, (Buenos Aires: RESDAL, 2013), 104.

⁸¹ Gutiérrez Rivera, "Discipline and Punish," 498–500.

also require that the state provide one prison guard for every 11 inmates.⁸² The improved law and segregation of prisoners should improve efforts to rehabilitate juveniles convicted of minor offenses.

4. Security and Police Institutions

For mano dura policies to succeed, the state needs to ensure that police forces are adequately trained and professionalized. Furthermore, oversight mechanisms must be in place to make certain that police officers operate within the national legal framework and are promptly punished for all instances of abuse. Without the establishment of a well-trained police force and systems of accountability, police officers are prone to perform in an overly repressive manner and remain unconcerned about respecting citizens' civil rights.⁸³ Regrettably for the Honduran youth population, politicians and judicial institutions enacted mano dura and zero-tolerance policies without properly professionalizing and developing the national police force. Under pressure from politicians, police units have the immense task of restoring security and ending youth gang violence without receiving adequate training, budgets, and equipment to meet their mission requirements. As a result, Honduran police officers have been inept at restoring security since the implementation of mano dura.⁸⁴

The lack of state investment in professionalizing and improving the patrolling capacities of the national police has contributed to an increase in repressive police tactics. In their efforts to implement mano dura objectives, mass raids, forced confessions, and indiscriminate arrests of youths have become standard practices. Increased training and oversight mechanisms are necessary to reduce the high incidences of police abuse directed toward juveniles. Nevertheless, neither state nor senior police officials have taken the

⁸² RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 104.

⁸³ Ungar, "La Mano Dura," 95

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 98

necessary measures to improve the effectiveness and quality of the Honduran police.⁸⁵

Besides being overly repressive, Honduran civil society groups and human rights organizations consistently denounce the national police for being corrupt. Highly attributed to the low wages, police officers, at all institutional levels, have become involved with drug trafficking organizations and other criminal enterprises. Honduran police officers have also been implicated with various crimes to include non-judicial homicides, bribes, and robberies. To reduce corruption, the Ministry of Security needs to implement improved vetting mechanisms to verify that they are admitting high quality professionals into the ranks of the national police.⁸⁶ In 2013, the average monthly salary for 83 percent of the police officers in the Honduran National Police was \$472.⁸⁷ Even for Honduran standards, \$472 a month is not a sufficient salary to properly provide for a family. To improve the quality of police officers, the state needs to provide greater monetary incentives and improved work conditions to decrease police officers' vulnerabilities toward becoming corrupt and developing unethical behaviors.

In May 2012, the Honduran legislature passed the Police Purging Law to grant the Ministry of Security the authority to dismiss police officers suspected of being corrupt and having close ties to criminal organizations.⁸⁸ However, most efforts by the state to rid the national police of corrupt police officers have been poorly executed and overly politicized. Among the greatest criticisms of the purging law is that high level officials within the police and the justice sector instructions have used the law as a tool to remove unwanted low level police officers and give the perception that the Ministry of Security is being proactive in regulating and strengthening its police force. In December 2013, the purging law

⁸⁵ Ungar, "La Mano Dura," 94,98

⁸⁶ Korthuis, "CARSI in Honduras," 174–5.

⁸⁷ RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 99.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

came under attack when the media reported that countless police officers, known for their diligent dedication and professionalism toward their police work, had fallen victims to the purges.⁸⁹ The public perceived the government's dubious purges of uncorrupt officials as a major step backwards toward professionalizing and cleaning the national police. Corrupt senior officials fired respectable police officers that had received extensive U.S. police training and had demonstrated the ability to pass all the U.S. Embassy administered background checks and vetting procedures. Conversely, the Purging Law has failed to effectively scrutinize the practices of senior police officials, whom Honduran civil society groups suspect of being the biggest perpetrators of police corruption. The distorted application of the Police Purging Law has only served to further weaken the national police and dilute the public's confidence toward their security institutions.⁹⁰

5. Militarized Policing

Since the Honduran public lives in a constant state of fear of falling victim to youth gang violence, the nation has become accepting of the increasing encroachment of the military's role in internal security matters. Apart from fearing youth gangs, the public also distrusts the Honduran National Police. In contrast, the public has greater confidence in the Honduran Armed Forces' abilities to restore order due to their superior professionalism, legitimacy, and training. Growing concerns of the police ability to restore public order and reduce internal corruption has prompted the Honduran government to expand the role of the military in internal security matters. The view of citizens and political leaders is that authorizing the military to assume internal security functions is necessary to overcome the high levels of youth gang violence and delinquency. Given the

⁸⁹ Korthuis, "CARSI in Honduras," 175.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 175–6.

national police's current ineffectual status, the public and the government perceive the military's involvement as a public necessity.⁹¹

Using the military to support the police is not a new concept in Honduras. Since 2002, the Honduran government has regularly authorized the military to reinforce police anti-gang operations and neighborhood patrols. However, the military in support of police operations are only effective at providing immediate, short-term relief. Since military forces are neither designed nor trained to conduct police functions, governments should not become overly reliant on them to serve as an additional arm of the police. Furthermore, past use of the military to support *mano dura* policies have led to abuse and overuse of aggressive military tactics against juvenile gangs and petty criminals.⁹²

Nevertheless, the current administration of President Juan Orlando Hernández has continued to advocate for sustained militarization of the national police. Upon assuming office, President Hernandez expanded heavily militarized police units known as the Tropa de Investigación y Grupo de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad, TIGRES (Special Intelligence and Security Response Troops). Although they are a civilian police force, TIGRES units are different in that they possess advanced weapon systems, receive military training, and conduct high-risk counternarcotic and anti-gang operations. Through their tactical superiority, TIGRES enhances the capacity of the national police to establish control of gang ridden Honduran neighborhoods. However, the numbers of trained TIGRES remain minimal so are unlikely to make a major contribution toward reestablishing public security in the near future.⁹³

With the passing of the Military Cooperation in Public Security Law in 2013, the Honduran legislature authorized the armed forces to grow by 5,000

⁹¹ Liza Zúñiga Collado, "Desafíos Institucionales De La Colaboración Policial-Militar: El Triángulo Norte," *URVIO, Revista Latinoamericana De Seguridad Ciudadana* 12, (2012): 84–95.

⁹² Ungar, "La Mano Dura," 99.

⁹³ RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 96–99.

troops to establish the *Policía Militar de Orden Público*.⁹⁴ Military Police units, which the Ministry of Security does not control, are trained and equipped to conduct internal security operations alongside the national police. Military Police troops accompany policemen on joint patrols but defer all arresting procedures to the police officer on the scene.⁹⁵

President Hernandez's 2015 appointment of Army General Julian Pacheco to Minister of Security further highlights the militarization of the Honduran public security institutions. Unlike his predecessors, President Hernandez chose to appoint an active duty military officer rather than a civilian. The president's decision was based on his aspiration to instill military ethos, professionalism, and expertise within the national police. Although General Pacheco resigned his military commission prior to assuming office, he was the first active duty military officer selected to lead the institution responsible for overseeing the internal security of the nation.⁹⁶ Apart from undermining the democratic advancement of civilian leadership, the selection of a military officer to lead the Ministry of Security conflicts with Constitutional Decree 155–98. The 1998 decree established the Ministry of Security with the sole purpose of separating the national police from the influence and control of the Honduran Armed Forces.⁹⁷

The long-term reliance on military personnel to support policing functions has undermined the development of an already weak police force. In an effort to equip and train military soldiers to perform police functions, the Honduran legislature has diverted funds from the national police to militarized policing. Rather, the state could have used desperately needed resources to hire more police officers or train and equip more police units. Nevertheless, the Honduran

⁹⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 96,106.

⁹⁶ "Honduras: General Julián Pacheco Será Nuevo Ministro de Seguridad," *El Heraldo*, December 15, 2014, accessed May 14, 2015, www.elheraldo.hn/pais/777120-331/honduras-general-juli%C3%A1n-pacheco-ser%C3%A1-nuevo-ministro-de-seguridad.

⁹⁷ RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 97.

government continues to expand the military's policing capacities during a period when police officers find themselves scrounging and stealing to acquire essential equipment. State endeavors to professionalize and improve the crime-prevention capacities of the national police will remain unsuccessful as long as the Honduran government continues to expand the internal security roles and functions of the military.⁹⁸

D. HONDURAN NON-REPRESSIVE APPROACHES

Within the last 15 years, the Honduran government has also sought less suppressive methods to address its youth violence crisis. The administration of President Carlos Roberto Flores (1998–2002) first sought to reduce the proliferation of violence by promoting gang prevention programs for the Honduran youth. Prior to leaving office, President Flores was successful in passing Law 141–2001 that established a prevention-based strategy. The passage of this law gave way to Programa Nacional de Prevención y Reinserción Social de Personas Vinculadas a Pandillas (PNPRRS) (National Program of Prevention, Rehabilitation, and Social Reintegration). PNPRRS served as the governmental body with the capacity to coordinate national and international efforts to educate at-risk youth and their families. Its collaboration with international organizations like the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) addresses the social and economic ills confronting disenfranchised Honduran youth. By promoting the efforts of PNPRRS, the Honduran government expanded its capacity to work with youth vulnerable to gangs and to help those seeking to leave the gang lifestyle. PNPRRS also reinforced state and NGO efforts to provide young adults access to programs that promote education, gang prevention, poverty alleviation, and jobs training.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Korthuis, "CARSI in Honduras," 181–2.

⁹⁹ Programa Nacional de Prevención, Rehabilitación y Reinserción Social (PNPRRS), *Situación de Maras y Pandillas en Honduras*, UNICEF/PNPRRS, 2012, 83, http://www.unicef.org/honduras/Informe_situacion_maras_pandillas_honduras.pdf

During the administration of President Manuel Zelaya (2006–2009), the Honduran government also implemented more comprehensive approaches to reduce the sources of national violence. Zelaya promoted government-sponsored social programs to target the root causes compelling young children and juveniles to join the crime-centric maras and youth gangs. While in office, Zelaya increased the incorporation of prevention and rehabilitation programs within the national police anti-gang strategy. He also made efforts to reduce reliance on repressive policing advocated through the *mano dura* policies. To support his anti-gang prevention strategy, Zelaya expanded the incorporation of community police units under the newly established Gang Prevention Division of the national police.¹⁰⁰

Since its implementation, the Honduran Community Police force has sought to improve their partnerships with the communities they serve. To reduce youth violence and gang memberships, the community police have created various anti-gang prevention programs, especially designed to influence and inspire elementary-age children and their parents. Police officers trained as instructors and prevention counselors aim to dissuade school-age children from joining gangs by registering them in anti-gang programs such as Educación para Resistir y Evitar las Maras (EREM) (Education to Resist and Avoid the Maras). These programs have tremendous potential to enlighten young children about the life-long implications from choosing to join a gang and engage in a life of crime. However, the success of the community police anti-gang programs is heavily dependent on a limited government budget. Since community police programs are less of a priority, only a small number of Honduran children have been able to participate in programs such as EREM.¹⁰¹

Various NGOs and religious organizations are also playing a vital role in implementing gang prevention programs for at-risk Honduran youth. These organizations are highly critical of the state's inclination to apply repression

¹⁰⁰ Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," 100.

¹⁰¹ Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," 100.

policies, especially when they hold state officials responsible for promoting policies that have resulted in the widespread poverty and academic underperformance of Honduran youth. As such, they have sought to resolve the economic, academic, and vocational tribulations compelling Honduran youth to join maras. By working directly with gang members and imprisoned juveniles, NGOs and church organizations strive to address the root causes that are impeding marginalized youth from sustaining normal livelihoods. Apart from gang prevention programs, these organizations are providing drug addiction counseling, job training, and adult education classes to youth gang members.¹⁰²

The Honduran penal system has also established programs to promote the rehabilitation and social reintegration of youth serving long prison sentences. With the resources and assistance of PNPRRS and UNICEF, the Honduran penitentiary system is in a better position to provide training and educational opportunities to imprisoned youth. While in prison, youth have access to job training workshops and primary education classes to improve their opportunities to become productive members to society when they complete their prison sentences. By engaging incarcerated youth, PNPRRS recognizes that young adults are less likely to continue their past criminal and violent behaviors if they gain valuable job skills in prison. Penal education programs also aim to offset the lack of schooling that Honduran youth lacked prior to becoming gang members and entering prison. Education and rehabilitation programs are essential tools to end the vicious cycle of criminality that Honduran youth are experiencing. By learning vital life and works skills, youths are able to become members of the national workforce and gain honest means of earning money. More importantly, they are an effective approach to preventing youth from returning to a life dependent of gangs and violence.¹⁰³

Job training and education programs are essential to providing youth an alternative to leading lives as gang members. Many gang members find it difficult

¹⁰² Ibid., 101–102.

¹⁰³ PNPRRS, *Situación de Maras y Pandillas en Honduras*, 83.

to leave a gang when they reach their adult years. Since youth tend to join gangs in their early teens, they lack marketable job skills by the time they reach their 20 years of age. Through the jobs and education programs that NGOs provide, young adults can break their dependence on gangs and criminality to make money.¹⁰⁴ However, the success of these programs, to reduce gang membership, has remained minimal in Honduras. Very little coordination, collaboration, and planning exists between NGOs and church organization in implementing their programs. Furthermore, collaboration with state and police organization has also been marginal. In effort for these programs to have lasting effects, extensive coordination and planning must exist between the NGOs, religious organizations, and government agencies. The NGO sponsored anti-gang programs have the opportunity to achieve long term success, only if they can improve their ability to work in partnership and reinforce their efforts with the state.¹⁰⁵

Nevertheless, the Honduran government has struggled to garner the political and societal support to make prevention and rehabilitation programs a priority. The Honduran government has continued to have a preference toward repression based *mano dura* policies since they provide a possibility of bringing a quick and easy end to the youth gang problem. Unfortunately, youth rehabilitation and reintegration programs remain severely underfunded in Honduras even though they are an effective approach to drawing kids away from gangs. Ultimately, prevention and rehabilitation programs such as PNPRRS, community policing, penal vocational training, and NGO education programs have had limited success in reducing youth violence in Honduras.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Wolf, "Mara Salvatrucha," 82.

¹⁰⁵ Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," 101–102.

¹⁰⁶ José Miguel Cruz, "Government Responses and the Dark Side of Gang Suppression in Central America," in *Maras: Gang Violence and Security in Central America*, eds. Thomas Bruneau, Lucia Dammert, and Elizabeth Skinner, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press), 145.

E. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Honduras' mano dura policies have failed to restore the public security of the nation and address the core issues leading to the proliferation of youth violence. Thirteen years after its implementation, Honduras maintains its position as the most violent country in the world.¹⁰⁷ Mano dura has failed to deter Honduran youth from joining gangs and participating in a criminal lifestyle. Marginalized youth continue to join the large transnational gangs due to the state's inability to address the mounting socioeconomic difficulties confronting the poorest sectors of the Honduran society. Rather than restoring security, Honduras' repressive approach has intensified the problem because subjugated gang members have become more violent and resilient to government suppression. Repression alone will not solve Honduras' problems.¹⁰⁸

Mano dura has not succeeded because institutional weakness continues to persist within the Honduran National Police, penitentiary services, and the criminal justice system. Partly due to corruption and the overwhelming lack of professionalism, Honduran institutions continue to be inadequately administered and staffed with untrained and poorly educated personnel. If the Honduran government wants to restore public security and reduce youth violence, it needs to develop its policing and criminal justice institutions to respect and protect the human rights of its citizens. The national police and the criminal justice sector must have improved systems of oversight to ensure corrupt and brutal officials are held accountable for their illegal and brutal acts against youths that may be associated with gangs. If state agencies continue to violate the civil liberties of its youth and fail to implement mechanisms of accountability to control corrupt state officials, the Honduran government will not be able to control the expansion of youth violence.¹⁰⁹ Honduran security policymakers can enhance their ability to

¹⁰⁷ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, 126.

¹⁰⁸ Jütersonke et al., "Gangs, Urban Violence, and Security Interventions," 391.

¹⁰⁹ Landman, "Violence, Democracy, and Human Rights in Latin America," 235–7.

confront youth violence by seeking to understand the sources contributing to youth violence rather insisting on the continued suppression of youth gangs.¹¹⁰

The government can advance its anti-gang efforts by committing the national police ability to build better community relations, rather than further militarize Honduran anti-gang efforts. The national police require added state investment to professionalize and improve the training of existing police forces. Rather than investing funds to integrate more military soldiers and TIGRES elements to confront youth gangs, political leaders should seek to improve the investigative capacity and effectiveness of existing police units. Although the militarization of the police can provide immediate short-term results, a long term solution necessitates regular police officers solve crimes and build better relations with the communities they serve. Continued militarization of the national anti-gang strategy will only serve to delay badly needed reforms for the national police and create more hostile relations between the state and already marginalized youth.¹¹¹

Government anti-gang efforts need to expand their prevention and intervention programs to engage at-risk youth before they join gangs or commit crimes. Since many NGOs and church organization are already delivering prevention and rehabilitation programs, the Honduran government can help improve coordination among organizations to enlarge the numbers of youth that can benefit. NGOs have done tremendous work in helping rehabilitate gang members in and out of jails. By working closely with NGOs, the government can help provide education, training, and incentives for youths to leave their gangs and end their cycle of incarcerations.¹¹²

Enacting the right policy to address youth violence in Honduras will require the government's commitment to develop a long term comprehensive strategy.

¹¹⁰ Mark Ungar, *Policing Democracy: Overcoming Obstacles to Citizen Security in Latin America* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011), 102.

¹¹¹ Korthuis, "CARSI in Honduras," 181–2.

¹¹² Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," 101–102.

As policymakers have observed within the last 15 years, zero-tolerance repression policies have failed to bring an end to youth violence and improve public security. Policymakers need to expand police capabilities to solve and prevent crimes, while also helping improve the socio-economic factors inhibiting Honduran youth from becoming productive, law-abiding citizens. Honduran youth can attain a chance at a better future, if the government can provide programs that help reduce extreme poverty and ensure they are able to achieve a high school education. The youth of Honduras will have less of a need to rely on criminality and violence to survive if they view their government as a vested partner willing to help them learn the skills and education for a better future.¹¹³

¹¹³ Mark Ungar and Enrique Desmond Arias, "Reassessing Community-Oriented Policing in Latin America," *Policing & Society* 22, no. 1 (2012): 1–2.

III. NICARAGUA

Similar to Honduras, Nicaragua is a Central American nation that has extensive poverty, poor education systems, youth gang problems, and a long history of violent internal conflicts. Strikingly, the incidence of youth violence and homicides in Nicaragua are substantially less than in Honduras. In the early 90s, incidents of youth violence soared throughout the country soon after the Nicaraguan civil war ended. However, extensive police reforms and proactive government efforts to reduce youth violence decreased national homicide rates by half within a ten year period.¹¹⁴ A 2013 U.N. study demonstrated that Nicaragua now ranks among the safest countries in the world, with only 11 homicides per 100,000 people.¹¹⁵ The fact that the Nicaraguan government has been able to reduce gang violence and maintain low levels is a major accomplishment. Unlike Honduras, the Nicaraguan government reduced its national homicide rates by implementing domestic security policies that required neither military participation nor large-scale repressive approaches against youth gangs. Through state collaboration with programs sponsored by NGOs, Nicaraguan youth gang members have greater opportunities to leave their gangs and become productive citizens.¹¹⁶ The Nicaraguan government has been successful in addressing youth violence because it has built stronger criminal justice institutions and has implemented a community-oriented security strategy that addresses the socioeconomic challenges confronting Nicaraguan youth.¹¹⁷

This chapter examines the Nicaraguan government's efforts to promote community policing, strengthen its criminal justice institutions, and integrate NGO programs to improve the socioeconomic conditions of the youth population. The

¹¹⁴ Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 105–107.

¹¹⁵ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, 126.

¹¹⁶ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 19–21.

¹¹⁷ Cruz, "Government Responses and the Dark Side of Gang," 156–7; Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 118–9.

first section provides an overview of how youth violence surged toward the end of the Nicaraguan civil war. The next section explains how the Nicaraguan government has relied on non-repressive anti-gang policies to reduce youth violence and gang criminality. Section three highlights the public security reforms the Nicaraguan government undertook to strengthen its criminal justice institutions and augment their mechanisms of accountability. Section four elaborates on the significant roles international organizations and NGOs have played in supporting Nicaraguan preventative and rehabilitative strategies. The chapter concludes with findings and recommendations for improving the Nicaraguan approach for reducing youth violence.

A. POST CONFLICT CONSTRUCTION OF NICARAGUAN YOUTH GANGS

For the greater part of the 20th century, social violence prevailed in Nicaragua. In a dictatorship spanning 43 years, the brutal Somoza family dominated Nicaraguan society and government. Ultimately in 1979, revolutionaries of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, also known as *Sandinistas* or FSLN, succeeded in toppling the Somoza regime and establishing a socialist government after more than 20 years of guerilla warfare. However, the defeat of the Somoza regime gave way to 20 more years of violence as a devastating civil war ensued between the Sandinistas forces and the U.S.-supported Contras militias. Through the extensive support of the international community in helping negotiate a peace and the FSLN defeat in the presidential election to Violeta Chamorro, the Nicaraguan civil war ended in 1990. Although the war was finally over, Nicaraguan society continued to live in a state of perpetual fear due to the violence and criminality that ensued in the post war.¹¹⁸ As noted by Nicaraguan citizen, Luis Fanor Hernandez, the nation descended into a state of paralysis due to the proliferation of youth violence, especially within the nation's capital of Managua:

¹¹⁸ Dennis Rodgers, "Youth Gangs in Colombia and Nicaragua: New Forms of Violence, New Theoretical Directions?" in *Breeding Inequality - Reaping Violence: Exploring Linkages and Causality in Colombia and Beyond*, ed. Anders Rudqvist (Uppsala, Sweden: Collegium for Development Studies, 2003), 122.

“The war is over in Nicaragua, we’re at peace now” ... that’s what [government officials] say, but have you seen how we live? Look at what’s happening in this country, all this delinquency, all this crime ... People are scared, everybody lives barricaded in their homes because it’s so dangerous ... You can get killed for almost anything—money, jewellery (sic), your watch, but also your clothes, your shoes, or even for just looking at somebody the wrong way ... It’s like this everywhere, in all the poor neighborhoods ... I tell you, this isn’t peace, it’s war; we’re living in the middle of a war again ... The only difference with the past is that this war is no longer happening in the mountains, but right here, in the city.¹¹⁹

When the civil war ended, thousands of demobilized Sandinistas and Contra soldiers merged to form armed criminal gangs that looted and terrorized the Nicaraguan cities. These gangs, known as *pandillas*, consisted primarily of youth since most combatants were young teenagers when they had been conscripted to fight. Criminal violence surged because the national economy was in ruins and the postwar government struggled to reintegrate former soldiers into society. Without jobs or homes to return to, gangs of demobilized troops began to raid and plunder as their primary means of survival. Making matters worse, the criminal gangs had the capacity for extreme violence since most members had extensive combat experience and were heavily armed with military weapons and ammunition.¹²⁰ A great portion of the demobilized troops were also unable to gain employment after the war because they lacked marketable job skills. Many of the former fighters developed into young adults knowing only how to conduct guerilla combat operations and how to obtain their necessities through violence. For the remainder of the decade, neighborhoods had to form their own vigilante protection gangs to protect residents from outsiders. Violence and homicide rates surged throughout the nation as vigilante neighborhood gangs killed and mutilated strangers whom they believed were rival gang members with intentions to steal inside their neighborhoods.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Dennis Rodgers, “Slum Wars of the 21st Century: Gangs, Mano Dura and the New Urban Geography of Conflict in Central America,” *Development and Change* 40, no. 5 (2009): 958.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 952.

¹²¹ Rodgers, “Youth Gangs in Colombia and Nicaragua,” 125–127.

Nicaraguan youth gangs emerged as the primary providers of neighborhood authority, security, and subsistence. Although most gangs were protective of the neighborhoods to which they belonged, it was common for them to enter other neighborhoods to steal, beat, and kill rivals. As the Nicaraguan government struggled to provide security and improve the economy, neighborhood gangs continued to grow in strength and numbers. Especially within the poorest neighborhoods, boys as young as seven years old would leave school to join neighborhood youth gangs. Just like their predecessors, young, uneducated kids were learning to become criminals to help provide for and violently protect their struggling neighborhoods. According to national police figures, Nicaragua had over 110 gangs and more than 8,500 youth gang members by the end of the decade. Although the national police was notorious for underreporting the severity of the gang crisis throughout the 90s, these measures still represented a 500 percent growth within a ten year period.¹²²

When drug consumption began to increase within the Nicaraguan youth population, the role of gangs as guardians of the neighborhoods began to deteriorate. As youth became addicted to crack-cocaine, crime and violence began to soar throughout Nicaragua. Neighborhood residents who were once thankful for the protection youth gangs provided soon began to fear them. Local residents became the easiest targets for youths to assault and rob in order to buy more drugs. As the incidence of crack-cocaine use increased, so did the incidents of assault, rape, and homicides.¹²³ Drug consumption also contributed to the escalation of violence and hostility between rival youth gangs. Within the most dangerous neighborhoods of Nicaragua, youth gangs were responsible for over 60 percent of crime-related killings.¹²⁴

Although public security had deteriorated to dangerous levels throughout the country, the postwar Nicaraguan government was committed to addressing

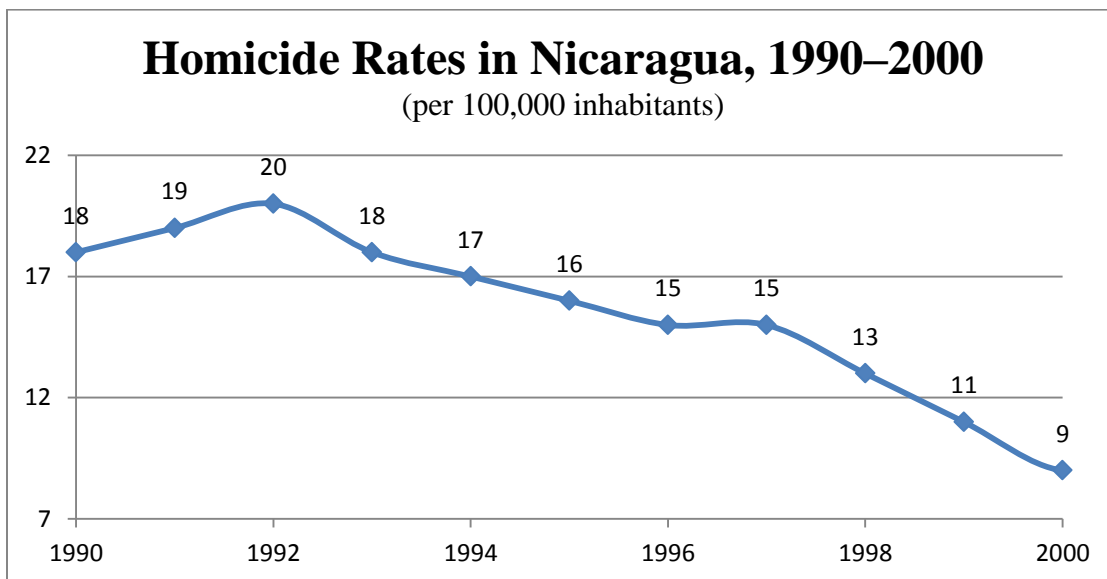
¹²² Rodgers, "Slum Wars of the 21st Century," 954.

¹²³ Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 106–107.

¹²⁴ Rodgers, "Youth Gangs in Colombia and Nicaragua," 125.

the socioeconomic problems compelling youth to resort to violence and criminality. Nicaraguan public security institutions and civil society became active partners with the state to reduce the national homicide rates and improve the conditions inflicted on the youth population. By the end of the decade, the Nicaraguan government and society were able to cut the national homicide rates in half (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Homicide Rates in Nicaragua, 1990–2000¹²⁵



B. ADDRESSING THE POSTWAR SURGE IN YOUTH VIOLENCE

After the Nicaraguan civil war ended, the government made it a priority to reduce the number of unregistered weapons that remained dispersed throughout the country. The availability of uncollected civil war weapons was contributing greatly to the surge in firearm-related homicides and armed robberies. Weapons were widely available everywhere in Nicaragua because the Sandinistas and the Contras forces had supplied large quantities of weapons to any willing, fighting citizen during the war. As a consequence, millions of unaccounted weapons

¹²⁵ Dennis Rodgers, “‘Disembedding’ the City: Crime, Insecurity, and Spatial Organization in Managua, Nicaragua,” *Environment & Urbanization* 16, no. 2 (2004): 117.

remained at the disposal for anyone to use, including youth gangs. To diminish the overabundance of guns, the national police relied on gun turn-in programs to collect and destroy firearms throughout the country. By reducing the number of available weapons, the Nicaraguan government sought to reduce the number of gun-related homicides and crimes.¹²⁶

The widespread availability of military weapons also created conditions in which youth gangs and other criminal organizations had the capacity to out-gun most police units. Without much effort, youth gangs could acquire weapons, such as handguns, assault rifles, and hand grenades that still remained scattered and easily accessible. Since weapon availability has been a common problem throughout Central America, Northern Triangle countries have used this as a pretext to militarize their anti-gang policing strategies. However, the Nicaraguan National Police has continued to work toward building trusting relations with its communities to make the gun turn-in programs a success. As a result, thousands of citizens have voluntarily relinquished their weapons to the various national turn-in programs. Within the last 25 years, these programs have made it possible for the national police to destroy hundreds of thousands of weapons that were once in the hands of youth gangs and criminal organizations.¹²⁷

The Nicaraguan gun turn-in programs greatly reduced the number of weapons available for citizens and youth gangs to commit homicides and armed robberies. The programs have been so successful that Nicaragua is now a global leader in weapons collection and destruction, helping the country become one of the safest in Central America.¹²⁸ To this day, the public continues to support national police efforts to reduce the number of illicit weapons on the streets. The public has been instrumental in providing police information that has led to the seizure of thousands of weapons. Public provided information has enabled police units to conduct raids and searches of criminal gangs suspected of possessing

¹²⁶ UNODC, *Transnational Organized Crime in Central America*, 59.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

¹²⁸ Rocha, “Street Gangs of Nicaragua,” 112–113.

vast arsenals of illegal weapons. Between 2008 and 2013, the national police seized nearly 20,000 illegal weapons, such as handguns, machineguns, shotguns, rifles, and grenades.¹²⁹

1. Improving Institutional Capacity

A major reason Nicaragua was successful in addressing the surge in youth violence in the postwar period was that it made it a priority to build stronger and more accountable criminal justice institutions. The fact that Nicaragua was emerging from a civil war and undergoing a complete government transition facilitated the process of implementing major reforms. The democratic electoral removal of the Sandinista National Liberation Front government paved the way for Nicaraguans to construct government institutions from the bottom up and implement public security reforms that were more responsive to the needs of civil society. The 1990 reforms produced security institutions that respected the rule of law, coordinated with community organizations, and confronted rising criminality with greater capacity. Following the post-transition reforms, Nicaraguan security institutions emerged with improved capacity to control the issues that had stimulated youth violence.¹³⁰

A positive shift toward improving the Nicaraguan security structure occurred when Violeta Chamorro defeated Daniel Ortega in the 1990 presidential election. Upon taking office, Chamorro was influential in bringing about positive changes within the public security institutions.¹³¹ Her collaboration with international organizations, opposition civil society groups, and the *Unidad Nicaragüense Opositora* (National Opposition Union) political party, helped dissolve the FSLN-dominated security and military institutions of Nicaragua. Chamorro was able to establish new institutions in which security actors were

¹²⁹ Malcolm Alvarez-James, "Nicaraguan Police Seize Illegal Weapons and Reduce Crime," *Dialogo Digital Military Magazine*, August 20, 2014, accessed June 15, 2015, http://dialogo-americanas.com/en_GB/articles/rmisa/features/regional_news/2014/08/20/nicaragua-incautacion-armas.

¹³⁰ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 1–2.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

subordinated to their democratically elected leaders, professionalized, and depoliticized. With the introduction of effective public security reforms and the depoliticization of the national security apparatuses, the Ministry of Interior (MIGOB), the Nicaraguan National Police, and the army gained greater autonomy and capacity to meet the security needs of the nation.¹³²

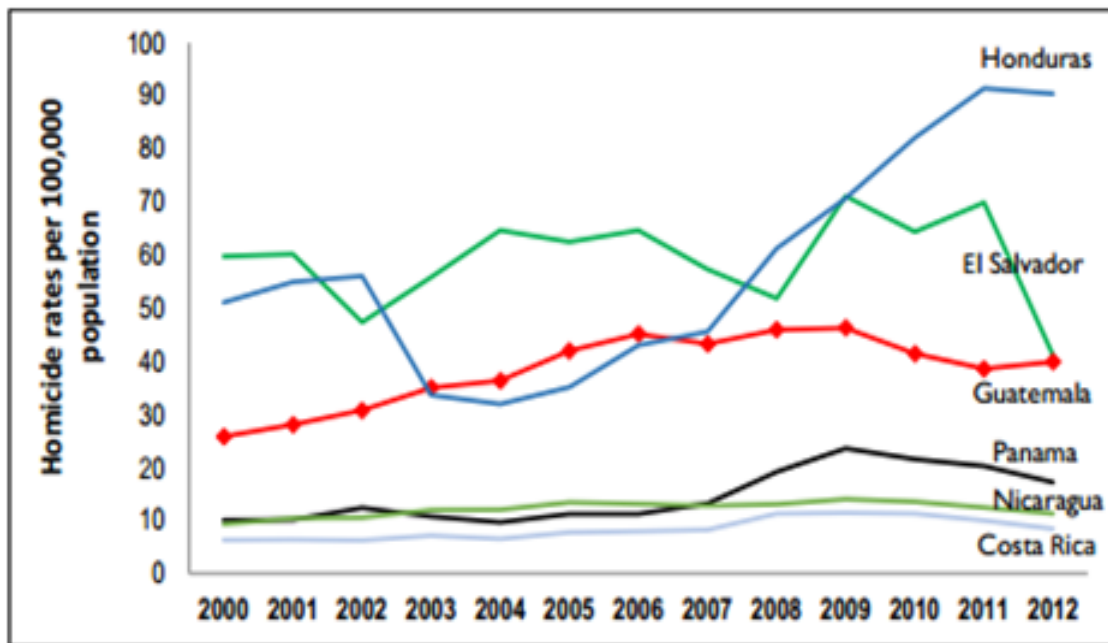
The Nicaraguan government devoted the entire decade of the 90s to strengthening and reforming its security and criminal justice institutions. To support the extensive process of professionalizing the Nicaraguan national security forces, the United Nations oversaw the demobilization of the Sandinista Police and the Sandinista Popular Army (EPS). Following negotiations between the FSLN and the Chamorro administration, former members of the Sandinista Police and the EPS became integrated into the newly established National Police and National Army. To date, the Nicaraguan security and criminal justice institutions remain in a continuous state of modernization. In particular, state modernization efforts remain focused on expanding community policing strategies and gang prevention programs.¹³³ What emerged from the exhaustive efforts of the Nicaraguan government and the international community was a more legitimate and respected public security structure.¹³⁴ By the end of the 90s, the Nicaragua reforms were foundational in reducing the national homicide rates and transforming Nicaragua from a war-torn, crime-ridden nation to one of the safest countries in Central America (see Figure 4).

¹³² Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 19.

¹³³ RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 108, 120.

¹³⁴ Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 112.

Figure 4. Homicide Rates in Central America, 2000–2012¹³⁵



2. Enduring Gang Prevention Efforts

To confront youth violence, the Nicaraguan government has preferred to implement anti-gang policies that are geared toward promoting gang prevention and improving community relations. In contrast to Northern Triangle countries, Nicaraguan policymakers are disinclined to promote policing programs that rely on domestic repression, police militarization, and mass incarcerations of gang members. Through the 1990s, Nicaraguan officials were proactive in working with disenfranchised youth and providing them the social support necessary to prevent gang involvement. Rather than treating youth gang members as social pariahs who threatened public security, Nicaraguan officials viewed gang members as rebellious youngsters who required guidance from the state and the community. As such, criminal justice institutions have integrated the support of

¹³⁵ United States Agency for International Development (USAID), *Impact Evaluation of USAID's Community-Based Crime and Violence Prevention Approach in Central America: Regional Report for El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama* (Washington, DC: USAID, 2014), 11.

religious organizations, NGOs, and civil society groups to work with at-risk youth and promote community-centric prevention programs.¹³⁶

During the period other Central American countries were adopting *mano dura* policies, Nicaragua was implementing laws and creating institutions that promoted the welfare and legal rights of children. During the presidency of Arnoldo Aleman (1997–2001), the Nicaraguan government adopted the Code of Childhood and Adolescence (1998), the Law for the Promotion of the Integral Development of Youth (2001), and the National Plan for the Integral Development of Youth (2001). In 2000, the legislature also authorized the formation of the national Ombudsman for the Child and Adolescent (2000) to safeguard the constitutional rights of Nicaraguan youths. The new office of the Secretary of Youth (2002) further promoted state efforts to address the socioeconomic challenges impeding the social development of Nicaraguan youth. The amalgam of these laws and institutions reinforced the Nicaraguan government's commitment to protecting young people's constitutional rights and promoting their development as citizens. Of equal significance, these laws and institutions reflected the government's aspirations to prevent the expansion of juvenile delinquency.¹³⁷

Gang prevention programs have contributed significantly to the Nicaraguan government's ability to address youth violence. Since the 1990s, various presidential administrations have supported the National Police adoption of prevention programs. President Enrique Bolaños (2002–2006) was among the avid supporters of prevention-based youth programs. In an effort to transform Nicaragua into one of the safest countries in Latin America, President Bolaños welcomed the support of both international organizations and NGOs to support the development of a prevention-based gang strategy. By collaborating with these organizations, President Bolaños was able to provide his criminal justice organizations the necessary resources to expand their support to at-risk youth.

¹³⁶ Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 111–115.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

The success that gang prevention programs have achieved over the last decade has reinforced Bolaños' goal of making Nicaragua one of the safest countries in Latin America and having the international community recognize that achievement.¹³⁸

3. Community-Oriented Policing

The centerpiece for the Nicaraguan National Police strategy to reduce juvenile delinquency and promote the social reintegration of gang-members is *El Plan de Acción y Exposición 'Policía-Comunidad'* (Community-Oriented Policing). Through the community-oriented policing strategy, Nicaraguan police units aim to reduce crime and reintegrate disenfranchised youth into society through gang prevention, rehabilitation, and community-building programs. An advantage to community policing is that it incorporates the support of community leaders and social service organizations to extend opportunities to at-risk youth. Rather than permitting NGOs and social organizations to provide piecemeal, disorganized support, community policing elements help coordinate their efforts to ensure their services reach the youth groups that need help the most. As a result of the community policing strategy, the Nicaraguan government has seen better results than Honduras in reducing youth criminal behavior and gang membership.¹³⁹

Policing elements that garner support and legitimacy from the communities they serve are better able to conduct their policing duties. By demonstrating that police officers can provide assistance and mentorship, citizens, and particularly the youth, see them as partners rather than oppressors. By building strong relationships within their communities, police officers are able to understand the hardships and concerns inflicting the local youth. As such, police officers are in a better position to coordinate between criminal justice agencies, local schools, and social services to provide greater support to youth. Furthermore, police officers that have strong community ties are less likely to

¹³⁸ Ibid., 115–117.

¹³⁹ Ungar and Arias, "Reassessing Community-Oriented Policing," 8.

imprison youths who have associations with gangs. Through increased interaction, police officers are able to distinguish between youth gang members who have criminal inclinations and those who join for comradery. This has enabled police officers to provide assistance to at-risk youth and only arrest individuals who have committed crimes.¹⁴⁰

Nicaraguan police measure their success through the number of youths enrolled in prevention programs rather than focusing on youth gang incarceration rates. By working closely with communities that have a gang presence, police officers enable the youth to enroll in activities that reduce their susceptibility to gangs.¹⁴¹ Throughout the country, Nicaraguan police units sponsor sports tournaments and provide job training workshops to keep youngsters occupied and off the streets. Since the adoption of the Code of Childhood and Adolescence and the expansion of police prevention programs, the incidence of youth homicides and incarcerations of minors are continuing to decline. Apart from being highly popular among Nicaraguan youth, prevention programs claim to have decreased juvenile incarcerations by more than 90 percent.¹⁴² The Nicaraguan criminal justice institutions attribute much of this success to the efforts of the police prevention programs with at-risk youth. Although police organizations often inflate their statistics, these programs are providing at-risk youth desperately needed educational opportunities and training to develop vital work skills.¹⁴³

C. FURTHERING PROFESSIONALISM AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Compared to the rest of Central America, the Nicaraguan National Police has the smallest annual budget, the lowest number of police officers, and the

¹⁴⁰ Ungar, "Policing Youth in Latin America," 214–215.

¹⁴¹ Cruz, "Government Responses and the Dark Side of Gang Suppression," 142.

¹⁴² Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 118.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 118–119.

lowest monthly salary per police officer (see Table 3).¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it is among the most successful police services in the region. A reason the Nicaraguan National Police has been effective in addressing its public security issues, considering its low budget and available personnel, is a testament to its culture of professionalism and accountability.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 13–14.

¹⁴⁵ Cruz, “Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America,” 19–23.

Table 3. Statistics of Central American National Police Forces, 2013.¹⁴⁶

	Costa Rica	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua	Panama
Security Budget (millions of U.S. dollars)	\$2,741	\$1,351	\$877	\$807	\$497	\$2,751
Total Police Officers	14,201	22,055	26,201	12,805	11,732	23,824
% Female	No Data	10.5%	13.4%	No Data	30.0%	No Data
Monthly Salary (average)	\$481	\$424	\$509	\$472	\$120	\$690
Per 1,000 Inhabitants	3.0	3.5	1.7	1.5	1.9	6.2

¹⁴⁶ RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 13–14.

To inculcate its police force with the culture of professionalism and to reinforce the merits of community policing, the Nicaraguan government invests heavily in the training and development of its police officers. The National Police Academy provides all police candidates extensive initial entry training to ensure they become well-versed in basic law enforcement responsibilities, the rule of law, and the community policing strategy. Police candidates have to complete nearly six months of training at the police academy to become members of the police force. Candidates who wish to become commissioned police officers and detectives have to complete a rigorous four-year degree program in police sciences at the National Police Academy. Nicaraguan police personnel then have to continue attending professional development training and education courses for the entirety of their careers to retain police credentials and ensure they learn the latest techniques in community policing. By providing extensive police training and education, the Nicaraguan government is able to develop a cadre of professionals who respect the constitutional rights of citizens, reject corruption, and commit to the community policing model.¹⁴⁷

The Nicaraguan National Police also has multiple layers of internal controls to ensure the discipline and accountability of its officers. Within the national police, three distinct entities for internal controls exist. At the lowest level, citizens who have police grievances can contact the office of the internal affairs of the national police to submit complaints about individuals demonstrating unethical police practices and abuses. The internal affairs office has the authority to investigate citizen complaints against all officers. If police officers are found guilty, the internal affairs office forwards administrative and disciplinary recommendations to the police national headquarters. The internal audit office and the general inspectorate also exist to carry out investigations on authorities and individuals suspected of major criminal behavior. Critical to these organizations is ensuring that the prestige of the national police is maintained

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 125.

and that grievances from civilians are properly investigated and resolved. The general comptroller of the republic also functions as an external observer to regulate and monitor police behavior. With the employment of various oversight agencies, the national police are able to ensure the discipline and good performance of its organization is maintained.¹⁴⁸ By applying these measures of control and accountability, the national police can help maintain high levels of trust within their communities. To maintain trusting relationships with juveniles, internal oversight mechanisms help certify that police officers perform their duties with respect and professionalism.

Nicaraguan police officers have also demonstrated a propensity for holding peers accountable for police misconduct. Compared to Northern Triangle police forces, Nicaraguan police officers are more likely to respect the civil rights of juveniles and report abusive practices of their colleagues. Nicaraguan police officers are especially mindful to prevent extrajudicial punishments toward youth gang members.¹⁴⁹ Various human rights organizations have lauded police efforts of advocating self-accountability to reduce incidents of abuse. Furthermore, they have observed that the Nicaraguan Police, unlike in other Central American countries, have not formed anti-gang death squads. In the instances where police officers were implicated in the illegal killing of a person, police officials were prompt to prosecute their offenses.¹⁵⁰

1. Strengthening the Juvenile Criminal Justice System

To reinforce the community policing model, the Nicaraguan government also modernized its juvenile criminal justice system. The state has provided juveniles additional safeguards when facing criminal trials by introducing legislation, like the Code of Childhood and Adolescence (1998) and institutions like the Technical Office for Monitoring the Juvenile Criminal Justice System

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 126.

¹⁴⁹ Cruz, "Government Responses and the Dark Side of Gang Suppression," 145.

¹⁵⁰ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 23.

(2001). Through these measures, the state has an obligation to provide juveniles between the ages of 13 and 18 years of age technical legal assistance to ensure they receive a fair and speedy trial. The Code of Childhood and Adolescence and the improved juvenile criminal justice system were influential in ensuring that judges impose rehabilitative sentences rather than condemn youths to long prison sentences. Within the last ten years, these measures have significantly reduced the incarceration rates of youth. Nicaraguan judges are now 85 percent more likely to sentence juveniles guilty of petty crimes to rehabilitative counseling, job training programs, and community service. By sending fewer juveniles to prison, the juvenile criminal system in Nicaragua permits youth to learn from their mistakes in an effort to reduce repeat offenders. More significant, the state is sending fewer teenagers to jails where they would stand a greater chance of being victimized by other criminals or further indoctrinated into the criminal lifestyle.¹⁵¹

Nicaraguan prison guards also undergo extensive training to ensure the proper treatment of prisoners. Prison guards have to complete 344 hours of training to earn their certifications to work within the Nicaraguan Penitentiary System. As part of their training, prison guards become proficient in ethics, internal order, and the rehabilitation of criminals.¹⁵² The Nicaraguan government's effort to develop and professionalize its prison guard force reinforces its intention to use prisons as institutions of rehabilitation, especially for juvenile inmates.

2. Military Support of Internal Security

Although permitted by the constitution, the national police have not included the support of the Nicaraguan Armed Forces to support its anti-gang efforts. Nevertheless, the armed forces do contribute to safeguarding the nation's internal security. To prevent duplication of efforts, the armed forces are limited

¹⁵¹ RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 114.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 129.

principally to providing security in rural areas that lack police presence and to interdicting illicit transnational trafficking organizations. In particular, the Nicaraguan Army and Navy are extremely active in patrolling the overland and maritime transit routes to prevent the trafficking of drugs, persons, and other illegal products into the country. Besides these policing functions, the armed forces neither operate within the Nicaraguan urban centers nor support the national police in anti-gang operations. In instances where the military and police conduct joint law-enforcement operations, the National Police oversees and authorizes all efforts.¹⁵³

3. Strengthening Relations with Civil Society Organizations and NGOs

Nicaragua has established various governmental institutions to reinforce the community policing model and partnerships with civil society and NGOs. The Ministry of Interior (MIGOB) is the most prominent organization, for it is the executive body for various public security and criminal justice directorates, to include the General Directorate of the National Police and the General Directorate of the National Penitentiary System.¹⁵⁴ According to assessments from the Security and Defense Network of Latin America (RESDAL), MIGOB collaborates extensively with the National Council for Citizen Coexistence and Security and the Human Rights Ombudsman. In doing so, it ensures that the efforts of its subordinate directorates remain in harmony with civil society demands and in compliance with human rights protocols. By way of regionalized Social Crime Prevention Committees and security councils, Nicaraguan citizens can broadcast their security and institutional concerns to the MIGOB.¹⁵⁵ Consequently, MIGOB has been able to garner expansive public participation to develop optimal, less repressive crime prevention and anti-gang policies. Through this composition, MIGOB and the Nicaraguan civil society remain in

¹⁵³ RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 111, 127.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 119

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 111.

agreement and committed to the prevention approach over mano dura policies.¹⁵⁶

MIGOB has also incorporated the support of NGOs and church organization to reinforce its gang prevention and rehabilitation approach. According to José Luis Rocha, policing strategies that integrate support from NGOs are highly proactive in reducing gang violence. NGOs and church organizations have been able to reinforce police-sponsored community-building projects because they help establish job programs for unskilled youths and encourage civic participation. With their incorporation of these aid organizations, the state can ensure more Nicaraguan youths gain access to vital assistance programs. Moreover, these organizations have been influential in providing outreach programs to youth that live in extreme poverty and are at-risk of joining gangs. NGOs can also overcome the limitation of state funded projects because they can incorporate additional monetary resources with the support of international aid organization. Through their participation, they have been able to create job opportunities for former and current youth gang members. Consequently, NGOs and church organizations have contributed to the overall decline in gang memberships and youth violence.¹⁵⁷

D. PANDILLAS VERSUS NORTHERN TRIANGLE MARAS

Although the Nicaraguan pandillas created a national public security crisis, government efforts have been effective in preventing them from becoming as violent as the criminal gangs operating within the Northern Triangle nations. Compared to the Central American maras, such as the highly violent MS-13 and Barrio 18, Nicaraguan youth gangs remain significantly smaller, highly fragmented, and less hostile toward local citizens and state actors. Unlike the maras that consist of thousands of members, pandillas now rarely exceed more

¹⁵⁶ Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 119.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 114.

than 20.¹⁵⁸ UNODC studies estimate that there are currently about 268 youth gangs in Nicaragua with close to 4,500 members in all (see Table 4).¹⁵⁹

Table 4. Central American Gang Membership¹⁶⁰

Country	Estimated Gang Members
Honduras	36,000
Guatemala	14,000
El Salvador	10,500
Nicaragua	4,500

Migration patterns also help explain why maras and the U.S. gang culture remain elusive in Nicaragua. Historically, Nicaraguan immigrants prefer to migrate to Costa Rica, with a smaller percentage choosing immigrant communities of South Florida. Nicaraguan immigrants have not adopted the violent behaviors synonymous with U.S. gangs and maras since gang presence in both these locations are minimal. Conversely, immigrants of Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala often settle in U.S. cities, such as Los Angeles, that are rife with gang violence and have high mara populations. Furthermore, Nicaraguan youth have not had to join gangs for survival and a sense of belonging since their families have better assimilated into their new communities. When Nicaraguans have had to return to their country, either by choice or through deportations, they have not imported gang customs.¹⁶¹

However, Nicaraguan migration patterns and U.S. immigration policies alone do not justify why Nicaraguan pandillas did not become as prominent and as violent as the Northern Triangle maras. It is significant to note the prominent role the Nicaraguan public security institutions and civil society played to reduce

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 107.

¹⁵⁹ UNODC, *Crime and Development in Central America*, 60.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 60.

¹⁶¹ Cruz, "Criminal Violence and Democratization in Central America," 6.

the homicide rates that surged soon after the Nicaraguan civil war ended in 1990. More importantly, it is necessary to recognize the actions the Nicaraguan government undertook to reduce the national homicide rates in half within a ten year period. By acknowledging the efforts the Nicaraguan government and civil society carried out to support disenfranchised youth, policymakers can gain greater insights into the development of effective anti-gang and youth enrichment programs.

E. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In comparison to the Northern Triangle countries of Central America, the Nicaraguan government has been extremely successful in addressing its youth gang crisis. By pursuing a community-oriented policing strategy, Nicaraguan officials have drastically reduced juvenile delinquency by promoting the reintegration of disenfranchised youth into society through gang prevention, rehabilitation, and community-building programs. Moreover, the Nicaraguan government has done a more effective job in incorporating the support of civil society organizations and NGOs to extend opportunities to at-risk youth. With the collaborative effort of the state and civil society, juveniles and young adults are gaining access to essential educational opportunities and jobs training. By gaining valuable skills, Nicaraguan youth are decreasing their necessity to join criminal gangs.¹⁶² Through the community policing strategy *Plan de Acción y Exposición*, the Nicaraguan government has managed to equally reduce its national homicide rates and extend a helping hand to its at-risk youth population.¹⁶³

The Nicaraguan government has also taken added measures to professionalize and develop its criminal justice institutions to reinforce the values of community policing.¹⁶⁴ By advancing the professionalism of the Nicaraguan

¹⁶² Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 114–9.

¹⁶³ Ungar and Arias, "Reassessing Community-Oriented Policing," 8.

¹⁶⁴ RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 125.

National Police, police officers are learning to work closely with vulnerable communities and serve as mentors to misguided juveniles. As communities expand their relationships with police officers, communities are experiencing significant declines in youth incarceration rates and gang memberships.¹⁶⁵ Criminal court judges are also learning to impose more rehabilitative sentences, such as rehabilitative counseling, job training programs, and community service duties. Rather than condemning youths to long prison sentences, where they are likely to join gangs and adapt criminal behaviors, judges are issuing sentences that are permitting adolescents to learn from their mistakes. The judicial shift to deliver alternative sentencing has contributed to the overall decline of the youth incarceration rate and the prospect of juveniles becoming repeat offenders.¹⁶⁶ Nicaraguan prison guards also undergo extensive training to ensure the proper treatment and rehabilitation of imprisoned youth criminals. The government invests in the training and development of its prison staff to ensure that offenders can successfully reintegrate into society when they complete their sentences.¹⁶⁷ In keeping with the community policing model, the Nicaraguan criminal justice institutions have promoted the rehabilitation of at-risk youth, rather than policing through repression and mass incarcerations.

In sum, Nicaraguan government institutions, civil society organizations, and NGOs have all contributed in reducing the national incidents of youth violence and expanding opportunities to disenfranchised youth. Dissimilar to the Central American youth that have been exposed to *mano dura* policing, Nicaraguan youth are responding positively to the community-oriented preventative polices of the Nicaraguan government. Nicaraguan youth are more likely to view their government institutions as legitimate actors and respectful of their constitutional rights. Furthermore, Nicaraguan youth have greater confidence that the state and its partners will be more sympathetic and mindful to

¹⁶⁵ Cruz, "Government Responses and the Dark Side of Gang Suppression," 142.

¹⁶⁶ RESDAL, *Public Security Index Central America*, 114.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

improve their deprived social conditions. As long as the state continues to promote the consolidation of its institutions and the expansion of youth social programs, Nicaragua will be able to maintain its levels of youth violence low.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 118–120.

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IV. CONCLUSION

Soaring youth gang violence has transformed Central America into one of the most dangerous regions in the world. Governments of the region continue to experiment with various social, political, and security strategies to help bring about positive change to the spiraling crises.¹⁶⁹ Honduras, similar to El Salvador and Guatemala, has implemented robust anti-gang laws and an aggressive militarized-policing strategy to restore public order. Central to its public security strategy is the implementation of mass incarcerations of gang members.¹⁷⁰ Conversely, Nicaragua, resembling Panama and Costa Rica, has pursued a significantly less aggressive anti-gang strategy. Central to the Nicaraguan approach are its community-oriented programs that promote gang-prevention and the social reintegration of former gang members.¹⁷¹ After analyzing the case studies of Honduras and Nicaragua, this thesis sought to identify primary factors that can help improve security conditions within nations enduring high levels of youth violence. In sum, this thesis confirmed the hypothesis that building strong and accountable criminal justice institutions as well as addressing the socioeconomic challenges that confront youth populations are necessary preconditions for reducing youth violence.

Although both countries share geographic proximity, prior exposure to authoritarian governments, and ongoing economic struggles, their strategies to address youth violence diverge significantly. After exploring the judicial systems, law enforcement structures, domestic security policies, and existing social programs that each nation possesses, it is evident that Nicaragua is better suited to confront its youth violence problems. By studying Nicaragua, Honduran policymakers can extract valuable lessons for improving its public security strategy. In order for Honduras to achieve meaningful progress in reducing youth

¹⁶⁹ Seelke, *Gangs in Central America*, 8.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷¹ Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*, 16–17.

violence, it will need to replicate some of the institutional reforms and community-based prevention programs that Nicaragua has undertaken.

Nicaragua's preventative, community-oriented approach has allowed citizens to reclaim a more stable and secure environment, following the surge of youth violence that transpired when the civil war ended. With its less repressive approach, the Nicaraguan government has been able to reduce its high homicide rates and better address its youth gang crisis. The major difference between these two countries is that Nicaragua has undertaken meaningful efforts to achieve institutional reforms and expand social and preventative programs to support its at-risk youth. Reforms of the Nicaraguan criminal justice system have enabled the government to build more professional police forces that are highly responsive to the needs and concerns of its population.¹⁷² Through increased professionalism and accountability, the Nicaraguan police forces have garnered support and legitimacy within their communities. Furthermore, Nicaraguan youth have favorable views toward police officers due to their increased exposure and interaction with community members. As a consequence, Nicaraguan youth and private citizens are more likely to cooperate with government entities and less likely to partake in gang activities.¹⁷³

In contrast, the Honduran methodology to reducing the incidence of youth violence has been less effective. Its *mano dura*, zero-tolerance approach against youth gangs has done little to reduce the escalating levels of violence or to restore peace and tranquility within its territorial borders.¹⁷⁴ A major reason that its *mano dura* policies have not succeeded is that the Honduran government has neither made meaningful strides toward reforming its criminal justice institutions nor expanded its government support of prevention and reintegration programs for its youth gang population. By embracing *mano dura* policies without emplacing necessary reforms, Honduras will retain the regrettable distinction of possessing

¹⁷² Rocha, "Street Gangs of Nicaragua," 118–120.

¹⁷³ Ungar, "Policing Youth in Latin America," 214–215.

¹⁷⁴ Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," 99.

the highest per capita homicide rate in the world.¹⁷⁵ Moreover, disenfranchised youth will continue to seek the support of criminal gangs if the government does not make their social inclusion a national priority. The Honduran government can vastly decrease gang memberships by expanding educational, vocational, and economic opportunities. In order for the Honduran government to increase this capacity, it will also need to vastly improve its inclusion and interoperability with NGOs, religious organizations, and civil society.¹⁷⁶ If Honduras does nothing to strengthen its weak and corrupt institutions, the state itself will persist as the biggest perpetrator of violence, irrespective of the brutal gang presence that exists.¹⁷⁷

Without strong criminal-justice institutions, states struggle to establish public security and order. Efforts to use heavy-handed policies while maintaining weak criminal justice institutions only propagate the levels of violence in already unstable nations.¹⁷⁸ Criminal organizations, such as youth gangs, increase their hostility toward state authorities when they perceive that their governments seek to unjustly persecute them.¹⁷⁹ Rather than declaring all-out wars against gangs, states contending with high levels of youth violence need to commit to socially reintegrating youth who lack basic education and job skills. Government and NGO-sponsored prevention and rehabilitation programs are critical toward ensuring that struggling youths learn the skills to become productive members of society, rather than lifelong criminals.¹⁸⁰ For these reasons, the institutional strengthening criminal-justice systems and extending government commitments toward the socioeconomic development of their youth are essential components to reduce youth violence in Central America.

¹⁷⁵ UNODC, *Global Study on Homicide 2013*, 126.

¹⁷⁶ Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," 102.

¹⁷⁷ Landman, "Violence, Democracy, and Human Rights in Latin America," 237–9.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁹ Cruz, "Government Responses and the Dark Side of Gang," 138–9.

¹⁸⁰ Mateo, "Street Gangs of Honduras," 101.

A. RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States needs to remain an active partner in helping resolve the security challenges of Central American nations in crisis. Uncontrolled violence and instability can significantly compromise American interests in the region and further expose our nation to external security threats. Of greatest concern are the three Northern Triangle nations of Central America, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. All three nations continue to endure soaring homicide rates despite their aggressive efforts to restore security. In El Salvador, the recent surge in youth gang violence has surpassed the levels of violence that existed during its civil war period. August of 2015 registered as the bloodiest month in the nation's history, with 907 homicides.¹⁸¹ Despite the relative peacefulness that exists within Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Panama, Central America continues to rank among the most violent regions of the world. To improve the security strategies of the region, U.S. policymakers need to continue promoting programs that help strengthen institutional capacities of criminal justice institutions and expand social programs that assist at-risk youth.

In 2008, the U.S. Congress initiated a security assistance and development program to help improve the threatening conditions of the region. This program is known as the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama all fall within the purview of CARSI. With the backing of numerous U.S. government agencies, to include USAID, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Departments of State, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Department of Defense, CARSI is able to employ a myriad of security and development programs.¹⁸² Over the last seven years, the U.S. Congress has appropriated over \$1.2 billion to help promote CARSI's goals.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Enrique Garcia, "Agosto Cierra con 907 Homicidios, 29 por Día," *El Mundo*, September 2, 2015, accessed September 4, 2015, <http://elmundo.sv/agosto-cierra-con-907-homicidios-29-por-dia/>.

¹⁸² Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*, 21–22, 26.

¹⁸³ Government Accountability Office, *Central America*, 9.

CARSI's five stated goals are as follows:

1. Create safe streets for the citizens of the region;
2. Disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband to, within, and between the nations of Central America;
3. Support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments;
4. Re-establish effective state presence, services and security in communities at risk; and
5. Foster enhanced levels of coordination and cooperation between the nations of the region, other international partners, and donors to combat regional security threats.¹⁸⁴

Although CARSI possesses vast potential to improve Central America's regional security, U.S. policymakers need to do more to support the initiative. Since the establishment of CARSI, regional homicide rates and the incidence of youth violence continue to remain high, especially within the Northern Triangle. Regrettably, not all CARSI programs have led to positive outcomes. However, CARSI policymakers can help achieve greater results by advancing anti-gang programs that have demonstrated to be successful in Nicaragua. By redoubling efforts toward proven policies, CARSI initiatives can ensure that past failed policies are not replicated. Moreover, CARSI policies can assist Central American states expand their institutional capacities to respond to public security threats and alleviate some of the socioeconomic factors that are compelling youth to join gangs.

To strengthen weak criminal-justice institutions within Central America, CARSI-supporting agencies need to promote public security reforms that ensure that citizen rights are protected. In order to safeguard citizen rights, CARSI needs to encourage states to advance the training and professionalism of their criminal justice, law enforcement, and penal sector institutions. Central American states

¹⁸⁴ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, *The Central America Regional Security Initiative: A Shared Partnership*, Fact Sheet, March 5, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/224013.pdf>.

all need to drastically diminish the military's role in performing policing functions. The potential for human rights violations tend to increase when states become reliant on their armed forces to carryout policing actions. Furthermore, the equipping and training of high-cost, elite police units should be reduced. Scarce fiscal resources should be prioritized toward expanding the equipping, training, intelligence processing, and investigating capabilities of traditional police units. Well-trained and professional traditional police units, as opposed to small and aggressive tactical units, are better suited to produce safer neighborhoods.

CARSI programs need to pressure government and criminal-justice institutions to increase their level of accountability to their citizens. By insuring that criminal justice institutions remain accountable to civil society, government entities are more disposed to perform in the best interest of their citizens. To promote fairness and decrease corruption, states need to impose harsh anti-corruption measures for criminal justice officials. Increased mechanisms of accountability make certain that governments do not exploit or mistreat marginalized citizens and youth during vulnerable circumstances such as in criminal trials. CARSI should also advocate against the overuse of harsh prison sentences for minimal offences. To decrease the number of youth confinements, governments need to expand and safeguard the legal rights of children and juveniles.

CARSI should also help promote the expansion of development and social programs that assist at-risk communities. One opportunity for expansion would be to promote the employment of gang prevention programs within the most impoverished communities. NGOs and civil society organizations need to be incorporated within government initiatives to increase the effectiveness of youth programs. The integration of NGOs and religious organizations is important because these groups are accustomed to running programs that help rehabilitate and reintegrate former gang members.

B. IMPLICATIONS

It is of significance to U.S. strategic interests that U.S. government agencies continue to aid nations undergoing high levels of criminal youth violence. If left unconstrained, the proliferation of Central American youth violence can have severe consequences on the region and our American interests. Unresolved violence can weaken already unstable state institutions and increase the levels of instability throughout the Western Hemisphere. It is of vital importance that regional governments remain strong and credible because transnational organized crime constantly seeks to exploit the vulnerabilities of weak states. If the Northern Triangle countries cross into the weak state category, greater quantities of illicit drugs will continue to flow past our borders and devastate our American communities.¹⁸⁵

Regional instability can give way to increased government corruption as well as significantly diminish the public's support of democratically elected leaders.¹⁸⁶ An unstable Central America can also lead to an increase in the already high number of illegal immigrants entering the United States. Since 2012, tens of thousands of children have entered the U.S. illegally in astonishing numbers, in hopes of escaping the Central American violence. This trend will only continue to intensify further if the regional security issues are not resolved soon.¹⁸⁷ It would not be an exaggeration to say that the U.S. has much to lose if it does not help improve the security conditions in Central America.

As military leaders, we have an obligation to assist our hemispheric partners in addressing their youth violence crisis and bringing peace to one of the most violent regions in the world. By using the existing CARSI structure and collaborating with other U.S. agencies, we can help distressed communities

¹⁸⁵ Meyer and Seelke, *Central America Regional Security Initiative*, 1.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Central America: Improved Evaluation Efforts Could Enhance Agency Programs to Reduce Unaccompanied Child Migration* (GAO-15-707) (Washington, DC: GAO, July 2015), 1.

escape their vicious cycles of violence and despair. If we succeed in supporting the governments of Central America implement constructive reforms, their youth will eventually gain the opportunity to lead respectable lives without having to depend on criminal gangs to survive. More significantly, Central American nations can gain the capacity to develop comprehensive strategies to provide their citizens the stability and support they deserve. By helping youth achieve their goals for a better future, we will help heal social wounds as well as restore the security and prosperity of Central American nations.

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